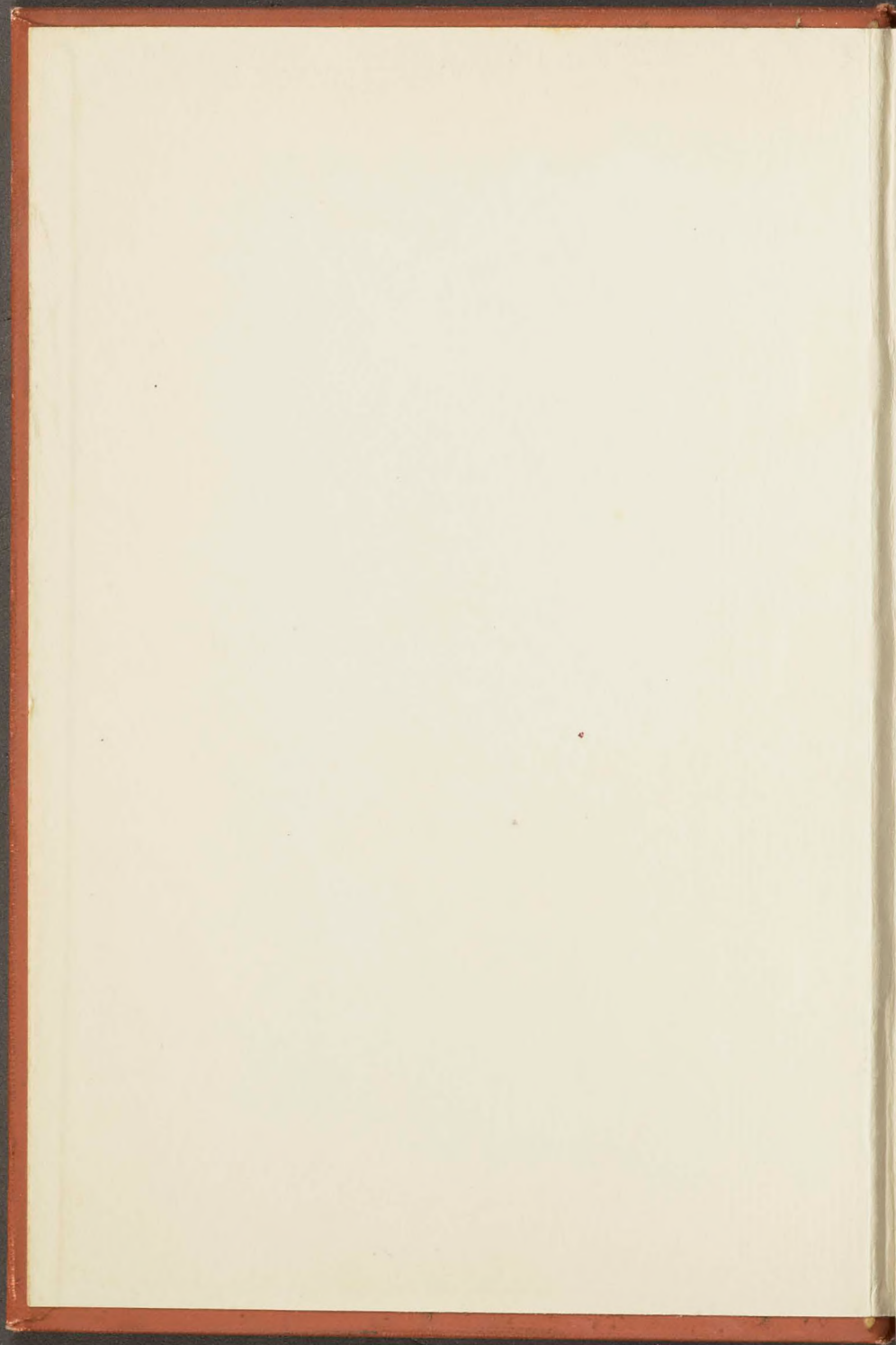


THE MYSTERY OF DIAMOND CREEK

*Alexander
Macdonald*





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OF DIAMOND CREEK

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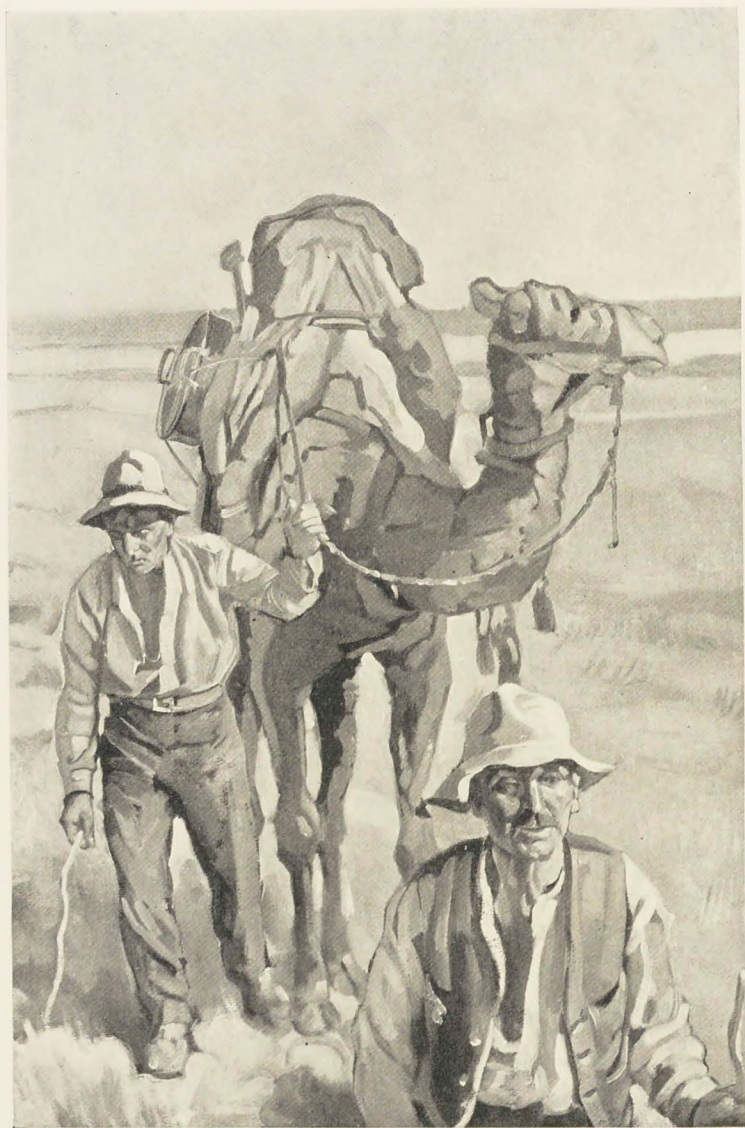
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NO BREAK IN THE HORIZON'S EVEN CURVE

Page 17

Frontispiece

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THE MYSTERY OF DIAMOND CREEK

BY

ALEXANDER MACDONALD

F.R.G.S.

Author of "Through the Heart of Tibet"

"The White Trail" "The Lost Explorers"

"The Pearl Seekers" &c.

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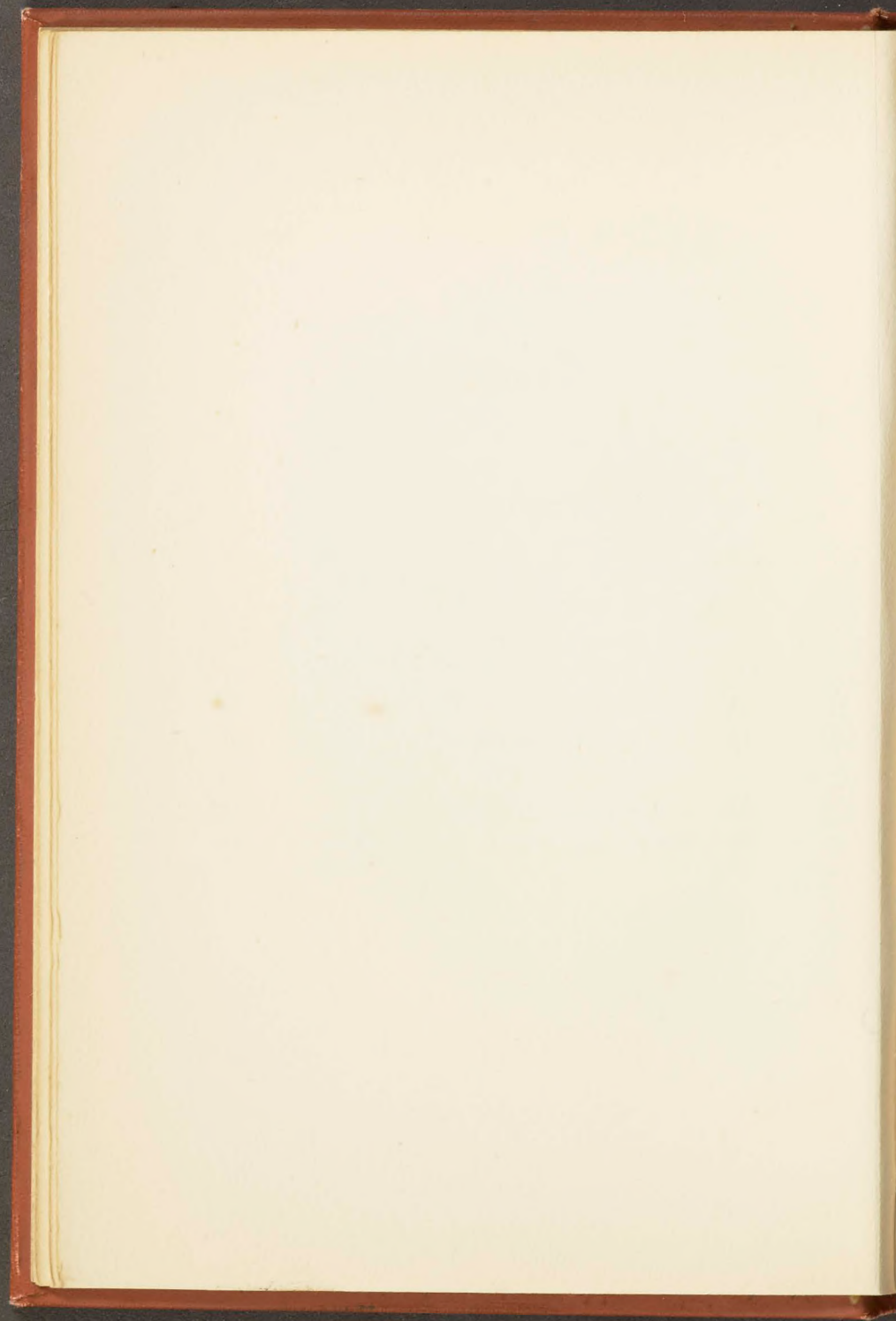
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To
Wendy

THE MYSTERY OF DIAMOND CREEK

CHAPTER I

The Boy

Stuart Notley's boyhood, like that of so many others who included the grim war years in their growth, was an anxious period. Though he was but nine years old when the world calamity happened, his mind received impressions of sorrow and unrest which were even then vaguely disturbing. Previous to this he had lived in a hazy dreamland of childish delight in which fairies, and occasionally good-natured giants, dominated the scene, subduing the wicked ogres and lurking demons in the woods of his fancy with an easy grace which he much admired. Sometimes he would descend from his realm in the clouds, and permit his baby sister to float around as an elf for a few minutes, which she would do very daintily, but without the dignity he desired. She was three years his junior, and her imagination was not equal to sustaining for

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long the exalted virtues he would have her possess as a fairy. Fairies never cry, but Laurel could dissolve in tears without apparent effort.

"It's such a pity you are only a girl," he would say, with a solemn shake of the head. On such occasions his mother would attempt to reprove him, but her smiling lips could ill convey even trivial censure. She was such a young-looking mother, too, with gentle face so roguishly belied by sparkling eyes. In the end she usually agreed with him, much to his discomfiture, for she would ask for his manly sympathy with a sex so obviously disadvantaged.

"Of course girls can't do things like boys, Stuart, and even when they grow up—like us—they are not nearly so clever as a great big boy, for they cannot climb trees and precipices, and kill lions and tigers and—and—crocodiles; they just stay at home and wait—wait for the big boy to come back——"

Stuart pondered over this speech for quite a while, then relented.

"I only meant small baby girls, Mummie," he whispered in deep apology.

She laughed and patted the boy's head tenderly. For the moment her thoughts had been wholly with the big boy she had particularly in view, and Stuart, looking up, was surprised to see a tear steal down the well-loved cheek.

Stuart's father, James Notley, M.E., was a mining engineer of repute, whose work took him all over the world, and into many strange places. It was seldom

The Boy

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that he got home more than once in a year, and then his stay might be only a few weeks at most. "Dad" was, in Stuart's young idea, a wonderful man, a sort of genie of the lamp, whose sudden if infrequent appearances from distant parts of the unknown globe were marked by general rejoicing and the spread of much happiness in his own particular domain; for always there were presents for him: curiously carved ebony elephants from India, delightfully serious nodding images from far-away China, many coloured beads and pebbles from islands where "black" people lived, and innumerable treasures dear to a boy's heart, gathered indiscriminately throughout the wide fairyland where his dad had wandered.

But Mrs. Notley knew that many of her husband's trips into the wild corners of the earth were not without risk. She feared for him in the great spaces of Siberia, and shuddered with dread when he was known to be in the steaming tropical areas where fevers raged. She longed for the time to come when he might give up this wandering existence, and share with her the joy of having a real home, and the gladness of watching their two children grow up. She sighed at the picture her fancy conjured up for her. Would it ever come to pass? Jim's life seemed to be in his work, or else it was he wished to save more money than she, at any rate, wanted.

Now, after a dreadful six months' silence, she knew he was coming home to her. His cheery cable from some unpronounceable place in Australia had told

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her that, and yet, for the first time in all these years since their marriage, she found her heart trembling with fear instead of joy. For it was the month of October, 1914, and Britain needed men. She knew that this was the call that James Notley had heard, and her soul, at first torn between pride and love, was soon the abode of fear.

So she wept furtively, while her husband hastened to her over the mine-strewn ocean, and Stuart watching with big serious eyes felt that his bright fairyland was shattered for evermore.

Jim Notley came home, and for a brief fortnight joy reigned in the household. After their first greetings were over she urged him to speak of his recent travels, as she was anxious to hear where he had been during the months in which she had not heard from him.

"I have got quite a strange story to tell you, sweetheart," he said, "and I'm sure you'll be deeply interested."

She drew her chair closer, and looked at him with eyes that shone with excitement.

"Tell me Jim. Tell me at once——"

He laughed at her sudden eagerness.

"Well, it's about a native, and—a diamond," he began.

Her look of surprise changed quickly to one of inquiry.

"A diamond!" she echoed. "Oh, Jim——!"

"And a native, dear," he reminded her gently. "I'm

The Boy

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not sure now whether one is more important than the other."

She kept silent with difficulty, waiting for him to continue.

"As you know, I had to visit a district in the north of Australia," he went on after a pause. "Tanami, my old bushman friend, who, as you know, accompanied me on various Australian journeys, was with me, and he coaxed me to call in and see the place where he got his name—Tanami, the gold township up there. Well, I had a good look round, and one day, while we were out at a dry creek some way east of the settlement, a native came along to our camp nearly dead with thirst. I gave the poor chap a drink from my water-bag, and while he was gulping this down I saw that he was wearing a string of curious-looking dull pebbles.

"He was tall for a black, and had a look in his eyes that gave me quite a shock, for we are accustomed to consider the aboriginal as pretty low down on the human scale. Not only this, but his face had a dignity of its own. Just fancy that! The features were extraordinarily regular, and instead of the squat nose which usually distinguishes the native of those parts this particular specimen had a decidedly well-shaped hooked proboscis——"

"But his necklet, dear," interrupted Mrs. Notley eagerly.

"Ah, just like a woman; but I'm coming to that, though it wasn't a necklet, it was an armlet, which again showed an uncommon trait in a tribesman. The

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stones were worn embedded in a strip of raw hide, stuck in position with a powerful cement, and they were——”

“Golden nuggets?” she guessed confidently.

“Wrong, dear. They were—diamonds!”

“Oh!” She gazed at him incredulously.

“No mistake about it,” he continued, “though I had the greatest difficulty in persuading my visitor to let me dig out one for inspection. He evidently considered the armlet as a sacred symbol, and was at first terrified that I meant to annex it altogether. Anyhow, I soon satisfied myself that the stones were diamonds. But when I tried to ask where they came from I could get nothing but wild shakes of the head and a stream of lingo that was absolutely unintelligible, though I have a fair knowledge of the native dialects. I noticed, too, that he was beginning to show signs of anger, and at any moment he might have swung at me with the flint-edged club he carried.”

She shuddered.

“He might have killed you, Jim.”

“Not much fear of that, dear, for I was well prepared, only I should have hated to shoot even a black for attacking me, as he thought, in defence of his rights. But immediately I stepped back from the door of the tent, he made a break for the bush and disappeared.”

She gave a sigh of relief, and Stuart, who had been absorbing the story with avidity, gazed up with eager question.

The Boy

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"Where did he go to, Dad?"

Jim Notley laughed.

"I didn't see him again, old man, but listen hard and I'll tell you where I think he came from."

His wife had been pondering things over.

"Why, Jim," she exclaimed, "that must have happened six months ago, and in your letter you did not say a word about it. You only mentioned that you were going to some outlandish place in Queensland which, 'as the crow flies', you said was only seven hundred miles away."

"That was my trouble," he announced, lightly. "I decided to go as near as possible on the lines of the crow I quoted, because the intervening country to the eastward called me rather urgently just then. You see, dear, diamonds have a tremendous value——"

He checked himself before her reproachful gaze. So often had he promised to take no unnecessary risks with his life, and yet his confidence always created a glamour which hid from him the elements of danger until they became too threateningly close. He watched her as a big schoolboy might have done who had been found out in some transgression, and when she smilingly arose and went over to the book-case in a corner of the room, his eyes followed her doubtfully.

She returned immediately with a large atlas which she plumped upon his knee.

"Show me," she said, with affected grimness, "just show me where you've been."

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"When you get on to my tracks with that voracious volume," he grumbled, "I recognize that the game is up. Here is the scene of my delinquency."

On a map covering the northern division of Australia he pointed with his forefinger to an area marked "Terra Incognita".

"Latitude, twenty-one," he murmured, abstractedly, "longitude just on the other side of a hundred and thirty——"

"Oh, Jim," Mrs. Notley cried, relieved, "it's only a little bit of a corner after all!"

He nodded hastily, realizing that her unaccustomed eyes had failed to notice the scale; then drew an imaginary line between Tanami in the west and Camoweel on the Queensland border.

"That is the diamond trail," he whispered, mysteriously, "and when this trouble is over in Europe, I'm going back to make our fortune. No more wandering all over the earth for fees that are always more or less uncertain. We'll be rich, dear, and the future of our youngsters will be safe. Thank God!"

"Tell me all about it, Jim," she said quietly, and her hand sought his and clutched it tightly.

He told her. It was just a simple story of hardship and determination. He touched but lightly on the difficulties encountered, thinking bravely that she might well be spared a knowledge of what man will endure when the lure is strong. He had started out with the bushman, Tanami Charlie, their outfit being carried by a single camel. For many days they

The Boy

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had seen not so much as a break on the horizon's even curve; all was dreary and uninspiring, and their feet sank in the yielding sand, making progress slow beyond all calculations.

"There was not much hope of finding diamonds—or anything else, in that quarter," Jim said ruefully, "and there was a time when I would have given all the diamonds in the world for a drink of water. But we just managed to scrape along, and then one evening Tanami found a native 'soak' in one of the most arid-looking creeks I have ever seen. It had a rock bottom of porphyritic granite. But I am forgetting that this is not a mining report, so I'll leave geology out of it.

"The country started to improve a bit after that, but still I could see no likely-looking location for the diamonds we had come to seek. Anyhow, by this time those same diamonds had lost a lot of their interest for us, and when another heavy sand belt had to be negotiated I began to take a serious view of things. The camel had held out gamely so far, but now he began to show signs of exhaustion. We thereupon jettisoned our whole mining paraphernalia so as to ease the load on the poor beast, and my sextant was about the only article I retained—and that nearly went too.

"After what seemed endless days, a jagged line of hills appeared on the skyline to the southward of our course. Whatever stuff they were made of, it was certainly not desert sandstone, and that was one

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cheering feature, for it indicated a change of country. We pushed on hopefully until the hills were on our extreme right, and stretching away from us. They seemed to rise without warning from the plain; that is, they did not appear to have any slope at the bottom—just a row of mouldering pinnacles. There was nothing to tempt us to pay them a visit. They looked the very picture of aridity, and, so far as I could judge at this stage, the tract we were crossing was as dry and unpromising as ever.

“We had not seen a sign of life for over a week—except for half a dozen huge crows that overtook us when we were a couple of days out and kept circling overhead every morning as we trudged along. Now, Tanami insisted that there were blacks about—he could smell them, he said. If there were, we did not see any, and I rather think poor Charlie had got to the state of imagining all sorts of things by this time.

“On that same afternoon we came to a dry creek. It was not the sort of mournful indentation in the land surface we had been accustomed to. It was a well-defined channel, with a rocky bank on the far side, and strewn with great angular boulders. While Tanami explored around, trying to find water, I investigated the nature of the strata showing. It was limestone in one place, and a close conglomerate in another. The limestone was so oxidized that the surface was quite black, but my pocket-knife was all that was necessary to make the hurried examination

The Boy

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I wanted. This, then, was an extension of the hills to the south. I did not try to reason out the oddity of limestone occurring in these wastes; the fact was there, and it very likely meant that water would be found in the near vicinity.

"And yet we could find no water. It was then that we regretted most having discarded our pick and shovel. We could not dig into the creek with our hands, though we tried; and meanwhile the camel lay down and died."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Notley, who had been listening with face tense as if the whole scene were before her.

He smiled at her concern, and went on:

"The sediment in the bed of the creek was quite damp when we scraped down a few inches, but a harder bar below defeated all our efforts, though we tried in a good many places.

"Night found us still clawing away at the cement-like gravel, but we were no longer searching for water. I had laid bare a sample of what I had started out to seek, and for a time we even forgot that our camel lay dead a few yards off, that the water-bag contained only a fraction of a gallon, and that we had some hundreds of miles to go before there was any certainty of replenishing it."

While he was speaking he took from an inner pocket a small cylindrical box such as is used by miners in Australia for keeping matches. Taking off the cover, he emptied into his wife's hand a tiny spherical package

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made up of some layers of tissue-paper wrapped around a hard substance.

Wonderingly she opened it out. There fell on the carpet an irregularly-shaped pebble, the size of a small marble. It rolled over on to the hearth-rug, where it glittered dully in the firelight. In awe she picked it up and gazed into it, as if it had been a magic crystal in which auguries of the future were stored.

Jim Notley, watching her tenderly, hastened the conclusion of his narrative:

"I took our position by the sun next morning, then abandoning everything but the water-bag we started out on the rather thin chance of reaching civilization in the east. To Tanami I owe my life. Without sextant or compass he steered a course true as a die. He found water where no one else on God's earth would have thought of looking for it. He brought the ship to port, with me, the nominal captain, disabled. But we'll return again when this trouble is over."

Mrs. Notley raised a face bedimmed with sudden tears.

"God bless Tanami Charlie," she murmured, "but neither of you must ever go back again. Men's lives are worth more than diamonds."

"It's a pity the Kaiser and a few others don't think so," he said, with a rueful shrug of the shoulders. Then he hastened to create a cheery note in the atmosphere, for Jim Notley was an optimist of a particularly manly breed. He predicted that the war would be over in no time, and that the world there-

The Boy

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after would be a brighter place to live in. Inwardly he doubted the encouraging words he spoke, yet his purpose was to comfort the aching heart of the woman, and to this end he strove with a confident eloquence that almost if not quite achieved success. As for returning to the creek of diamonds, he explained that the terrors of the trail no longer existed for him, since he knew by experience how to master them by improving his equipment.

She was only half convinced.

"But think, dear, what it will mean for us," he reasoned. "If it had been merely gold I could agree to leave it alone with little regret, for I know well that I could never transport machinery to the spot, but a fortune in diamonds is a different sort of proposition—and there must be a fortune there; it could be carried away almost in one's pocket. I found the place——"

"Won't Tanami Charlie outfit an expedition himself now that you are away," Mrs. Notley asked with growing interest.

He shook his head.

"The men of the bush are not built like that, but even Tanami, splendid fellow that he is, could not find his way back to that lonely creek with any certainty. Bushcraft allows a fairly wide latitude in direction when making for the markings of civilization. But to find a single spot in the midst of a Terra Incognita is a navigator's job. When I mention this I'm not thinking of Tanami, but of anyone else who

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might have watched us start out. There are always people who haunt the pioneer's footsteps in the hope of snatching the reward which the poor devil has so hardly earned."

Mrs. Notley was quite excited now, and he could see that the romance of diamond quest had touched her fancy, obscuring for the moment at least all her previous fears and hesitation.

"And that dear man, Tanami Charlie, was willing that you should come home to me when he must have so wished to return. Oh, Jim! I think he is wonderful."

Jim nodded.

"One of nature's gentlemen, Wendy, a type of the human species which grows strongly in the far out-back of Australia. In appearance rugged and unattractive, but a diamond in the rough nevertheless, with hidden values that come out under test. He was quicker off the mark than I was when it came to answering the Call which reached us at a little township on the edge of the wilderness. 'Boss,' he said to me in his even-toned, quaint manner of speech, 'there 'pears to be a real honest-to-goodness row on at the other side of the world. 'Tain't my funeral mebbe, but there's a bit o' me inside that sings out loud "Charlie git your gun", an' darn it, I think I'll toddle off and lend a hand.' When I saw him last he was in uniform, drilling hard, and keen as mustard to get on board a transport."

Mrs. Notley's thoughts overcame her.

"The best—the very best—in the world are going,"

she sobbed, and this time she would not be comforted.

Stuart, who had possessed himself of the neglected diamond, looked on the scene with boyish distress. His young mind was sore perplexed, for the joy of his dad's coming was being displaced by an unknown sorrow which welled up in his throat and brought fiercely resented tears to his eyes. He endeavoured to stretch his inadequate arms around the necks of his parents, who sat there together, the man with the tired eyes whispering words of cheer to the woman who mysteriously saw into the future and trembled at her vision.

Jim Notley forced a laugh of triumph at the touch of the boy's hand.

"See, Wendy," he cried, "I live again in this son of ours. Should I fall by the wayside the boy will step into the breach. Won't you, Stuart, old fellow?"

The boy seemed to understand what was required of him.

"I am going to try and be like you, Dad," he answered soberly, "for I think you are the bravest man in the world."

"God help me!" Jim muttered in dismay; "it will take some doing to live up to that reputation."

Then it was that his wife smiled through her tears.

"You have always set great store on the youthful idea, Jim," she said, "and now you have your reward, for 'out of the mouths of babes and sucklings cometh wisdom'."

They went out of the room arm in arm. The boy

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gazed wistfully after them; then, realizing that he still clutched the shiny pebble that his father had brought, he looked around for the little tin case which had enclosed it. This he found under a chair, where it had rolled, and near it was a tiny spool of thickish paper which just fitted within the cylinder. He replaced this in position, inserted the stone, and fixed the lid.

Then he discovered that as a plaything the box had quite entrancing possibilities. It would roll merrily over the carpet, reflecting light from its polished surface, and the cat pouncing ineffectually at it in its progress provided him with much diversion.

Jim Notley, returning for the forgotten gem, paused at the doorway and watched his son and heir make sport with the treasure he had all but given his life to win. He knew that the rough diamond would probably dress into a jewel worth a hundred pounds or more, but it pleased his droll fancy to see its value more properly estimated by unsophisticated youth.

"You may keep the box, old son," he said, "but let me have the bit of glassy stuff inside. I want to give it to Mother, and when you see it again I'm sure you won't know it."

"Of course I will, Dad," returned the boy, taking a good look at the glittering pebble before handing it over, "but it's a pe'fectly splen-did box, isn't it?"

Jim Notley went away, and the world's chaos engulfed him. To Stuart the long period that followed was just an unhappy blank relieved at rare intervals

by spasms of delirious joy when his father, mud-spattered and weary, would make sudden appearance and remain for a brief space. On these occasions the boy would ask many questions, and not always was he satisfied with the answers received. He was growing up in troublous times, when the mighty events of the day were thrust upon one and all indiscriminately. The immature brain was in a forcing house which wrought deadly effect on the many, but in some cases brought out an early blossoming, anticipating the years. It was a tremendous trial for the young, who dimly grappled with problems they could not possibly understand, and thus their development towards manhood's estate was hastened by a ruthless education not to be denied. Sorrow and suffering were common features of everyday life. The growing generation felt too early the heavy hand of affliction, and the sensitive brain became all too soon aware that the beautiful world was not quite the happy realm of its dreams, but had a sinister aspect hidden away, dreadful to behold.

So Stuart at ten was a boy thoughtful beyond his years, and his mother marvelled at the change, but failed to realize its cause.

Another year dragged on and then Jim Notley came home for a longer rest than usual, with a fragment of shrapnel buried in his skull. Outwardly he was the same cheery dad Stuart loved to remember, but there was an indefinable change somewhere. The eyes had a strained look, and the alert form was not quite so active in its movements. Then Stuart made a discovery

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which had been beside him all the time and yet he had not noticed it!

His mother had developed the same anxious expression. He looked in the mirror to make quite sure if he himself had not been affected similarly, but could find no such symptoms; and because of this he was vaguely grieved. He felt he was not carrying his share of the trouble, but when he mentioned this to his father, Captain Notley roared with laughter, then suddenly calmed down and patted the boy's head very gently.

"You're carrying enough weight for your young years, my lad," he said. "You will help most by sticking to your lessons, and doing everything you can for Mother when I'm not here."

Stuart's sister Laurel was now a quaint little girl of nine who clung obstinately to his hand at every possible opportunity. It was she who unconsciously gave the boy his first knowledge of his parents' secret concern.

"What are shares?" she asked.

"Shares?" he echoed blankly. "I dunno. What sort o' shares?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought they were something to eat, for I heard Daddy say to Mummie that we could not live on them, and that he hoped the war would be over soon."

Stuart nodded sagely.

"I understand, Sis," said he. "It's 'bout time I was grown up, I think."

Captain Notley returned to his duties, but in the middle of the fourth year he came home again, and

The Boy

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this time he looked as if he was going to die. He had been blown up in a sap, and was badly wrenched and bruised. Stuart hastened to his side the moment he was allowed.

"Oh, Dad!" he cried. "Oh, Dad——!"

Jim Notley screwed his face into a wry smile.

"It's nothing much, old man," he gasped. "What's the old saying?—Hoist with his own petard—that's what happened to me. I was hove up in my own sap. Engineers' luck, Stuart, but I can't complain. I've exploded the other fellows' picnic often enough, goodness knows."

That was the end of the war so far as Stuart was concerned, for Captain Notley recovered but slowly and it needed all his wife's tender care to prevent him having a relapse. Some strange driving force in the wasted frame was ever impelling him to be up and about, yet his physical being refused to respond to the mental efforts he made, and in grim resentment he passed slowly through the weary stages of convalescence. In spite of this, these were the happiest months the household had experienced for ages, it seemed. The haunted look left Mrs. Notley's face, and she became bright as the summer sunshine. Her husband had been saved for her. She gave thanks to God. Whatever worldly matters there were to trouble her were as nothing against this great blessing.

The Armistice came, and by this time Jim Notley was able only to hobble around with a stick. It was a tedious process, this getting well, and the invalid's

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fretting at his own futility did not help matters much. The cause of his mental unrest was quite common in those days among professional men of his own and lesser standing. The income he had been able to provide when the world was at peace had proved quite ample for all needs, but the war had altered all values, and, according to the new standard created, his savings seemed to him to be hopelessly inadequate. He had planned great things for Stuart. The boy was to be sent to a notable school, and afterwards to Oxford, and nothing was to be too good for the girl who was so sweetly growing up in her mother's likeness. The fault in Jim Notley was that his vision glimpsed too far ahead. His own boyhood had had few advantages, and he was determined that the younger generation should have a happier chance than had fallen to his lot. It was a lovable fault for which his wife worshipped him the more though she had no fear for her children's welfare. To make matters worse, the investments he had made had suffered serious shrinkage, and in one case—a mining property in which he was interested—the war had brought about a cessation of work and the company soon collapsed altogether.

On one of his flying "leave" visits Jim Notley had endeavoured to correct the financial leeway he had made by redistributing his shrunken capital in concerns that promised big returns. His hasty choice was unwise, and only a greater depletion of his resources was the result. In desperation he placed the remnant of his funds in Government securities in the name of his

The Boy

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wife. She did not know this at the time or she would have made objection, but the harassed man had only one thought in his mind—to protect his family against himself. He had reached the stage of considering that he was an utter fool in business. He did not know that many thousands at this time felt as he did, and from a similar cause.

In his recurring moments of self-reproach for the mess he had made of things, he always ended on a bright note of hope in the near future when he could resume his professional work.

“Cheer up, dear,” he would say. “There will be lots of big fees waiting for me now that the war is over. In my own particular job I had the field almost to myself. I’ll just pop in to some of the mining offices when I go up to London and see what’s doing.”

Formerly he used to speak so confidently of the fortune he would find at Diamond Creek. Now he never mentioned the subject unless in brief flashes of enthusiasm, for it was clear to him that he could equip no expedition thoroughly until he had replenished his resources. Meanwhile he was daily growing stronger, and with returning health the old whimsical light came back to his eyes, and there was no longer any falter in the courageous voice.

He paid his long-promised visit to London in the spring of 1919. He expected to be absent a week, but he was back at home within two days, obviously ill at ease in spite of his assumed air of smiling indifference. He greeted his wife affectionately; she thought he

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must have arranged to go away almost at once, and she *did* want to remind him about the diamonds.

“‘And there arose kings in Egypt who knew not Joseph’,” he quoted, with a laugh. “In these four years my name has vanished into the limbo of things forgotten. My juniors in the profession—not all of them British, by the way, have ousted me from my province. Patriotism in one was opportunity for the other——”

She put her finger over his mouth.

“Don’t be bitter, Jim. The whole world has changed, and we must plan everything afresh. We are not the only ones who will suffer——”

“It’s the boy,” he muttered. “He should be at a good school—among his own kind—but no, I should not say that. It’s the last dying kick of the snob in me, I suppose, for the so-called common men I have been associated with have been heroes—every one of them.”

“You need not fear for Stuart,” she said, looking at him with tender pride. “He has got a model of his own choice to follow.”

“God knows how I would fare without you, Wendy. You have a way of restoring confidence in a man that makes him want to put up a big fight to justify your faith in him.”

She was well content.

“You will fight and win as you did before, Jim, and now I’ll show you something that will make you forget your disappointment.”

She left him for a few minutes, and when she

The Boy

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returned she displayed in the palm of her hand a large sparkling jewel. He gazed at it uncomprehendingly, then took it between his finger and thumb and examined it critically.

"It's a dashed fine stone, Wendy. Where—where—? Why, surely this isn't *our* diamond?"

She nodded brightly.

"I had it cut while you were away," she added.

He was amazed at the transformation that had taken place. He saw at once that here was a gem without flaw. It had turned out far better than he had ever imagined. Indeed, lately he had become so distrustful of his own judgment that his early bright hope of making a fortune from his discovery had almost faded away. All sorts of doubts had entered his mind. And now, in a flash, he saw clearly again, and his old confidence returned to him.

"This is my chance, dear," he said quietly, "and I would have passed it by. I cannot afford to outfit a proper expedition, but if Tanami is back he'll be waiting for me, and he is a host in himself."

She struggled with the fears that came back to her at his words.

"I have—faith in Tanami," she said.

Stuart was now a manly boy of nearly fourteen. He had deep blue eyes, firm mouth, and a dominant chin. His hair was a mop of brown which refused to be tidy unless under the arbitrary correction of the shears, which were consequently often applied. He liked the boyish sports of his companions, but still more his

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tastes ran towards books, books of mysterious adventure for choice, and *Robinson Crusoe* had long been a first favourite with him. Perhaps hereditary influence had something to do with making him an ardent student of geography, and in fancy he would often explore the wilder corners of the earth with a pencil and atlas for inspiration.

On the night of his father's return from London he was deeply engrossed in drawing a chart of an imaginary journey through the mazes of the South Sea Islands. His sister, as usual, was watching him with a lively interest. These two were alone in a room that had long been considered the boy's very own retreat. In it were the toys of bygone years, cricket and football gear of the present era, and a confused miscellany of books. These last were spread all over the floor, and though there was quite a good table in the room, and two chairs, Stuart preferred to pursue his studies face down on the carpet. His limbs were not restricted in this posture, and he liked to be able to swing them around with freedom.

"Oh, look!" she cried, seizing his arm impulsively. "You're running right into an island. Do be careful, silly, or we'll be wrecked among—among caramels."

He paused to administer a lofty rebuke.

"Cannibals you mean, Sis. You eat caramels but cannibals eat you."

"Oh! Has Dad ever been eaten by a car—I mean a cannibal? Just a teeny-weeny nibble?"

He grunted his disgust, but refused to be drawn into

further speech on the subject. The illogic of girls was past his comprehension. To save, as he thought, further disconcerting interruption, he addressed her sternly:

"You're only a passenger on this ship, and passengers must never speak to the officer on duty—I've heard Dad say that, so I know it's right."

She succumbed to his superior wisdom, and watched him with increased admiration as he skilfully navigated the shoals.

By and by Jim Notley came along to see what new game the youngsters were at. Quietly he stepped into the room and unnoticed watched the young navigator bring his phantom craft safely to port at Sydney after many thrilling escapes from danger on the way. He echoed the boy's sigh of relief when the voyage was over, and Stuart, looking up, found his father's quizzical gaze upon him.

"Hullo, Dad!" said he; "ever sailed in these waters?"

His father laid hold of his nether garments in recognized nautical fashion, and executed a few steps of the sailors hornpipe before replying:

"I know every wave on that ocean, my bold buccaneer. Now turn over the leaf and show me how you can do a journey in an *unknown land*."

He whispered the last two words with melodramatic intensity. The boy gravely displayed the map of Australia, and pointed with his pencil to an area south-west of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

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"There you are, Dad," he answered, "but the scale is too small to show a decent track, and the name has taken up all the room."

Jim Notley got down on his knees to get a closer view. Over the space marked *Terra Incognita* a school-boy hand had superimposed the lettering "Notley's Land".

The man arose slowly; of a sudden it seemed to him that his son was no longer the child he had considered him, to be appeased by trivial talk. There were latent possibilities in the lad already crying out for recognition.

"Tell me, Stuart, old man," he said, after a little while, "what would you like to be when you grow a bit older? I think it's about time that Mother and I went into this. I'm not so sure that I want to encourage you to be another Jim Notley."

Stuart's face clouded, and his lips set tremulously.

"I want to be like you, Dad," he persisted, his cheeks flushing with growing agitation, "and Mother says I should try my hardest so that you'll be pleased with me—and I'm trying to learn things. I'm trying to understand everything I read. I'll soon be a help to you, Dad. You just wait—you just wait——"

The words rushed out with scarcely a halt, and left him breathless.

Jim Notley, though inwardly pleased at the spirit of the boy's outburst, was vaguely disturbed by its determination. It was not in his plan that his son should follow in his father's footsteps. Life had many

easier occupations to offer, but he had not the heart to discourage young enthusiasm at this stage. When he returned successful from the diamond quest he would be in a position to deflect Stuart's course along happier lines. So he reasoned, in the confidence of his own knowledge of what the future surely held in store.

He met the eager gaze of his son, and a glow of fatherly pride swept over him.

"I'm leaving next week for—Notley's Land," he said slowly. "Very important business, old man, and I may be away for a whole year. When I come back, you and I shall have a talk over things—and everything will be all right——" He placed his hand on Stuart's shoulder and, after a moment's hesitation, continued:

"I'm leaving you a real man's job this time. Take care of Mother while I'm away. Cheer her up when letters don't come; and if I am—delayed, carry on, lad o' mine, with a smile and a stiff upper lip."

Unconsciously the boy felt the deeper meaning in the words. The young face blanched, then became more resolute than ever.

"You can trust me, Dad," he made answer proudly, "and, and—if you get lost in Notley's Land I'm coming to find you!"

"With an atlas and pencil, Stuart?" Jim Notley queried playfully.

"No!" cried the boy, his face quivering. "With a gun an' a sextant."

CHAPTER II

The Birth of the "Mastodon"

Stuart's father had been gone a year, and for the last eight months no news of any sort had been received from him. His final letter, written from an isolated outpost in the far west of Queensland, had conveyed a message brimful of encouragement. It contained only one disappointing feature: Tanami Charlie had not returned from France, and no one had heard anything of him since his departure. Mrs. Notley's heart sank when she read this. Always in her mind there had been the picture of this rugged strong man accompanying her husband over the trackless wastes, and the thought had brought comfort. Jim Notley's plans, however, were not upset even by such an unfortunate circumstance. He could afford no delay in his arrangements; his regret was keen at having to go on without his faithful associate, yet it had to be done.

"I do hope Tanami hasn't been scuppered over there," he wrote. "I'll miss him badly, I know. But I'll keep his share waiting for him in hope that he may turn up. I've picked up a man here called Jennet, who in a cautious conversation told me he was a sort of 'expert' in diamonds. I have a suspicion that he knew something about my last expedition, and has been

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waiting for me to arrive. Anyhow, I'll take him along with me—and keep him out of mischief. I don't grudge him a share, and his knowledge may be valuable."

In a postscript he added: "Two camels this time and provisions for six months! Quite a tidy little expedition, isn't it?"

Over and over again Mrs. Notley had read this letter until she could repeat every word of it. She did not like the reference to the man Jennet; she never had liked it. She would have been so much more satisfied if her husband had chosen a simple bushman instead of this mysterious stranger—she guessed that he was a stranger—who knew so much about diamonds.

And now a year had passed, and still no joyful tidings came. She almost resented the covert sympathy of her few well-meaning friends. What right had they to assume that disaster had happened to Notley's expedition? They did not know Jim Notley as she did. They did not understand that this calm, fearless husband of hers would never admit defeat, and that he would come back to her even from the jaws of death. He might be delayed, but he would surely come. She tried to hide the gnawing pain at her heart, and smile bravely in the presence of her children, but she seemed to see in Stuart's eyes a silent understanding. She did not know that he had been marking off the months ever since his father had left, in happy anticipation of his return. She did not know that the boy's soul, quickened by the terrible years of war, had overleapt time, and waited only the physical development of manhood.

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It was he who spoke first.

"Mother," he said, "will you let me see Dad's last letter again—to read myself?"

It was always with her. She took it from her bosom, and handed it over. They were in the dining-room, and Laurel was deftly clearing the table after the evening meal. Stuart had been using his "retreat" less and less these days, for he hated to leave his mother alone. Now he had taken the big atlas from its accustomed place, and opened it out on the table.

"Good old Dad," he murmured heartily when he had read the letter. His mother's pent-up feelings gave way.

"Oh, I wish he hadn't taken that man with him!" she cried. "Why did he do it?"

"Why, Mother, the letter explains that. Dad didn't want to be followed; that's the reason—an' mebbe, too, the other man had a camel of his own. That would help Dad a lot."

She had not thought of things in that light, but realized that the boy's explanation was quite sound.

"A man who has got to be 'kept out of mischief' is no safe companion for your dear father, Stuart," she persisted. "He would be scheming and scheming all the time. Oh, I don't know what to think!"

The boy opened his eyes wide. Not one shred of his loyalty would he sacrifice. There could be no weakness in the armour of his dad.

"Mother," he whispered, placing his arms caressingly around her shoulder, "cheer up. Dad didn't

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get all his medals for nothin'. I'll show you on the map where he'll be. Just wait a minute."

He went back to his atlas, repeating to himself the three-syllabled name of the township from which his father had written.

"Camoweel . . . Camoweel. But I s'pose it won't be marked. Yes, here it is, Mother, all by itself, an' ever so far out."

Mrs. Notley came and looked at it over his shoulder. Westward a long way and a little to the south the bare blank area of "Notley's Land" showed up in a yellow splash of colour. He drew his pencil in a straight line towards it, and then hesitated.

"It's a big place, Mother, though it doesn't look so very much on the map. Why, the scale is a hundred miles to the *inch*! I never noticed that before."

Into the woman's mind there flashed a memory of her own early mistake in estimating her husband's route. She had been gladdened by its apparent brevity—and he had only smiled in that humorous fashion of his, not caring to undeceive her!

The boy's pencil wavered over the expanse, then jabbed at a remote extremity in triumph.

"There's Tanami, Mother," he called out eagerly. "The printin'g's so teeny, you can scarcely see it; but there it is, an' I know Dad was there."

His enthusiasm faded as he calculated the distance in inches.

"It's over five hundred miles from Camoweel to Tanami," he said in an awed voice.

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"Five hundred miles of thirst—and savages—and death," she said weakly.

Again youth asserted itself.

"It can't be so bad all the way, Mother, for I see a telegraph line marked over an inch away from Camoweel."

He ransacked his brains for a minute trying to recollect scattered bits of conversation that he had heard between his parents. Nothing that he could remember seemed to help him. He gave up in despair.

"To find a *real* place on a map, a man needs to know the latitude and longitude, Mother. I know, because Dad told me, and all the exploring books I've got say the same."

He looked round at his mother with eyes that sought anxiously for enlightenment.

She shook her head, and answered his unspoken thoughts, very quietly.

"I can't remember figures, dear, I was never clever like you. You say that a man needs to know these things, but you are only a boy, Stuart; you surely could not understand——"

The disappointment in his face hurt her, and with contracted brow she tried hard to recall the elusive symbols which her husband had repeated so often.

"It was twenty—something, and a hundred and thirty—or perhaps forty."

Stuart smiled his thanks. He would not for worlds have let her know that the vague directions given were useless to man or boy. She had tried to tell

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him; his young heart expanded with pride. But even his schoolboy knowledge told him that there could be no safety in a surmise such as this. It wobbled over too wide a space!

Regretfully he abandoned the idea of locating on the map the goal of Notley's Expedition, and for the rest of the evening he pored over a book he had borrowed from the school library; a book that made him feel that he was sharing the hazards of an explorer's life in the interior of Australia. The volume was the record of gallant Carnegie's pioneerings, an epic of calm courage and endurance which stirred the boy's heart like a trumpet blast. As he read he pictured his dad in these lonely wastes, and pride entered into his being and struggled mightily with the sadness that was there, dispelling it utterly.

But the weeks and the months flew by, and still no message! Mrs. Notley's crumbs of comfort were dwindling one by one. First she remained strong in the hope that no news was good news. As time went on she insisted to herself that the absence of bad tidings must surely indicate that nothing dreadful had happened. Now this negative solace was being taken from her, for the knowledge she so earnestly gleaned concerning such tracts as "Notley's Land" convinced her unwilling reason that no news might remain no news for ever more. The shifting sands, like restless seas, can keep their secret well.

Then came a time when hope died. Despairingly, Stuart's mother had addressed a letter to Charles

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Henley (otherwise Tanami Charlie) at the distant Australian outpost where her husband had expected to find him. It was a forlorn chance, she knew, for the bushman—if indeed he were alive—was not likely to linger long at a civilized settlement. Nearly six months later, an answer came, written from a mining camp near the Gulf of Carpentaria. It was a laborious scrawl, for Tanami Charlie was no penman, and his orthography was atrocious. Nevertheless it drew a woman's tears, a circumstance which, if the writer had known, would have caused him honest distress and much wonderment.

"Dear Mrs. Jim," he wrote—it was "Madam" originally, and that word had barely lost its identity in the process of superimposing the less formal term of address—"I received your letter after it had gone all over Ostralya looking for me. I got back to Camo-weel as soon as I could, for I was a hospital case, worse luck, an' thought I was goin' to peg out. I am downright glad you wrote, for I was sore with Jim Notley for taking a darn Dago with him instead o' me, only you has made things mighty clear an' I am sorrier than this blinkin' pen"—he had a qualifying adjective of a different nature for the pen, but this had been blotched over, and there were evidences of other attempts to find a descriptive word other than the one finally used—"can write.

"Jim Notley was the best mate a man could ever have, and I am packin' my swag when I finish this letter and goin' out to find him an' kill the Dago. I

reckon I can cut his tracks all right, an' if I doesn't I'll go right on like a blackfellow. Cheer up, Mrs. Jim. No more at present from your friend Tanami."

The rough sentiment conveyed in these sprawling lines was as balm to the wounded soul of the woman. This child of the great bush was calmly undertaking a desperate venture out of loyalty to a mate, setting no value on his own life, asking no praise.

The letter had been long on the way; it had been posted where dispatches of mails were infrequent, and communication with the outside world slow of establishment. Hard on its heels came dire intelligence of the bushman's failure. It was contained in the cabled news of the morning paper; just a few printed words meaning nothing to the many, but oh, so much, to the woman who waited. The message had been sent from a repeating station on the overland telegraph line which cut through the centre of Australia. The operator at his distant post had tapped to the world news of a simple bushman's effort. The message read: "Dight's Well Relaying Station—Charles Henley, suffering from spear wound, arrived in exhausted condition. Reports unsuccessful search Notley's Expedition."

That was all; yet it was enough. Stuart's mother no longer wept; her gentle eyes just gazed unseeingly as through a mist. It seemed as if her very soul had gone questing out into the desert. Her son, watching anxiously, would rather that tears had come. In vain he strove to give comfort, but his speech came slowly, and sounded in his own ears empty and unconvincing.

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Deep in his heart was one inflexible purpose, but he dared not speak of it—yet. He was not old enough to fulfil the proud boast he had made to his father; still, he cherished it. He could not help knowing that the home finances were now woefully straitened; the evidence of this was constantly before him.

“I’m not too young to work, Mother,” he broke out suddenly. “Dad depended on me. I know that——”

“Work, dear?” She turned to him questioningly. “What could my boy do? No, Stuart, whatever happens, you’ll finish your education.”

He put his arm around her tenderly.

“A fine man you would make of me, Mummie,” he said in earnest reproach. “What would Dad think of me if I shirked my promise.”

“Your promise?” she interrupted in wonder. “What could you at your age have promised?”

“To look after you, until he came back, an’—an’ he’s comin’ back—I’m sure he’s comin’ back——”

Laurel lent her voice in support of her brother.

“Of course Dad is coming back,” she proclaimed stoutly.

Stuart had his way. He found employment with a firm of motor builders in the district, who required the services of youthful hands in the construction of certain delicate pieces of mechanism connected with their manufactures. He was so naturally adapted for engineering work that he took an enthusiastic interest in his occupation, and quickly the manager discovered that in this boy there were the seeds of mechanical

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genius, which he did much to encourage. Perhaps his interest was occasioned to a certain extent by his knowledge of Stuart's history, for he was an ex-service man, and had a high appreciation of Captain Notley's war record, though he knew nothing of his previous wanderings. Anyhow, he was kind to the boy and gave him every opportunity for advancement.

Stuart made one strong companionship in these days. This was with Bob Murray, a young engineering student whose father had designed a new type of motor tractor which in experimental form was being evolved at Gray's works. Bob was a short and sturdy youth with a chubby and inordinately red face. He had the sunniest of dispositions, and was apt to get resentful only when remarks were made concerning his complexion. He was nearly a year older than Stuart, but he looked at least as much younger. These two met first when the "innards" of the apparently unwieldy tractor were being assembled. Murray senior was there—a gaunt, grey-faced man who seemed half asleep whilst he was watching most profoundly. What the new idea was in his invention Stuart had so far not the slightest inkling. Yet it was his hand that deftly tightened up the remote screws. It was his slim body that found passage beneath the undercarriage when dimly imagined defects had to be found, and duly marked for later recognition. Bob gazed at him rather enviously, and, immediately he had a chance, grasped him by the arm.

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"What d'ye think of the 'bus?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Stuart did not then know who his interrogator was; but he had an innate sympathy with the inventor, who stood aside as if lost in reverie.

"It's great," he answered promptly.

The red-faced youth beamed, showing two rows of strong white teeth. Under emotion his ruddy cheeks assumed a deeper hue. Stuart looked at him with growing surprise, then turned aside.

The other recalled him.

"You're a good sort," said he. "It's the Pater's 'bus. And I know it's red——"

"But it isn't red," corrected Stuart, misunderstanding the application.

Bob stretched out his hand.

"We're goin' to be friends," he said firmly. "My name's Murray—Bob Murray. What's yours?"

This was the beginning of a bond which strengthened with each boy's knowledge of the other. Bob had a tremendous faith in his father.

"He commanded a tank in the war," he confided, soon after their first meeting, "an' this new scheme of his is really a kind of commercial tank for crossing bad country where there are no roads—I hope the dashed thing will work as he thinks."

"Of course it will work," Stuart said encouragingly, as if there could be no possible doubt on the subject.

He was delighted to find himself shortly afterwards transferred wholly to the Experimental Department

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of Grays' Ltd., where Murray's "Mastodon", as it was called, was being slowly pieced together.

"This is your chance, my laddie," Macgregor, the kindly manager, said. "Get to ken every bolt an' lever o' that machine, an' you'll grow with it, for it's bound to be a verra wonderfu' success if a' goes as it should."

But the Mastodon was a long time in its evolutionary stage. Bit by bit it underwent alteration before it reached the point of being ready for trial. The unwieldy mass of machinery was undergoing transformation and becoming a more active if less formidable-looking symbol of progress. When finally it was given life, and moved its compact bulk around the enclosed yard with sinuous grace and a lightness almost incredible, the whole works' staff seemed to rejoice. And when it went farther afield, negotiating hedgerows and sandhills and ditches with equal ease, it was Stuart who sat by the driver as mechanical expert for the Mastodon. He had earned the right to the position by study and ceaseless effort alone.

It had been intended to manufacture the Mastodon type of vehicle on an extensive scale, for the need of such a form of transport in many countries was very great. It so happened, however, that a storm of controversy arose in the technical press about this time concerning the utility of commerce-carriers of the kind, and the effect of all this publicity was to create a doubt in the minds of potential users which was not to be easily displaced. So the production of Masto-

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dons in quantity was delayed pending a more hopeful outlook in the market, and meanwhile the original of the species occupied a corner in the workshop where it had been created. Occasionally Stuart was called upon to explain its mysteries to interested visitors, and less frequently he was allowed to pilot it around the yard for the edification of very special callers.

Bob Murray ceased to be a regular attender at the works, but as he had long been a caller at the Notley household, Stuart was sure of seeing his cheery visage on most evenings of the week. Bob, whose mother had died in his early childhood, loved to talk to Mrs. Notley, whose womanly sympathy with him was unbounded. She had guessed that it was through his insistence with his father that her boy had been given his chance, though Bob had always veered awkwardly off an admission of the sort. Laurel was a particular favourite with him. She called him, with impunity, the names he had usually dreaded. He was to her Red Indian at one time, and the Fat Boy in *Pickwick* at another, and to his own astonishment he found they sounded like endearing epithets and was absurdly pleased.

Laurel by now was fourteen, a *petite* and dreamily pretty girl holding in her large slumbrous eyes the promise of greater glories to come. She could play the hoyden one minute and weep bitter tears of repentance immediately afterwards. Such is the feminine way even at that blissful age when years are but harbingers of life's greater joys.

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Time had not effaced Mrs. Notley's sorrow. Her eyes had grown more wistful, and her still youthful face had taken on an aspect of gentle resignation. She seldom spoke of her husband now, but Stuart knew that he was never absent from her thoughts, and the boy growing into manhood would often clench his hands impotently, and repeat to himself the well-remembered words of his own wild promise: "With a gun and a sextant!" And, now he felt his growing strength, his years would not keep him back from making the great endeavour. He had never for a moment lost sight of his purpose. Latitude and longitude had become more than mere names to him; and there was a sextant in his room—a presentation which his dad had received but never used—which he gloated over. Still more, there was a service rifle hanging on the wall. He had all he required, but—always that "but" checked his impetuous fancies—his mother was so hopelessly poor.

Bob came in one night with a tale of woe.

"Poor old Pater has no luck," he said. "Some confounded blighter has crossed the Sahara with a Mastodon."

"I am so glad for your dear father's sake," commented Mrs. Notley. "That should prove how useful such things can be."

"But it isn't one of *our* beetles," he hastened to explain. "It's another make on a similar principle, an' now the public will rush it owing to the advertisement an' poor old Pater's left in the soup. He's feeling

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it pretty bad, for after all he pioneered that sort of 'bus, you know."

Bob had a shrewd suspicion that his father had been hard hit financially owing to the failure of his invention to command public confidence. He could not help knowing that experimental and construction costs had been very heavy, and the worst of it was that Murray senior was just the type of man to neglect these considerations until too late. So Bob gloomed, but loyally made no reference to his fears.

Stuart too was strangely silent. His sombre eyes had lighted up at the news his companion had brought, only to relapse quickly to their wonted thoughtful expression. He was deeply interested in Murray's Mastodon. He had hoped by his special knowledge of it to better his position at the works. He had another hope in which at times the cumbersome machine faintly figured, only his reason would not retain it. How could he ever possess such a costly contrivance?

It was only a few days later that his outlook brightened tremendously. A letter arrived from Tanami Charlie enclosing a draft for a hundred pounds. "It ain't much," he wrote, in his characteristic way, "but it may help some. I worried the spondulicks out o' a little gold reef that looked like a winner, but wasn't. I ain't got much use fer money, never being no good at figgers, an' as I is a perishin' bachelor I ain't got no wife to worry me 'bout gettin' rich. What about Jim's boy? He should be chock-full o' eddication by

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now, an' if you send him to me I'll teach him to be a miner like his dad, faster'n he could learn at college. I don't use cuss words—much, seein' no sense in them 'cept when argyfyng with niggers an' such like, an' I have a mighty fine book in my kit called *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which I reckon he'd like."

Again there was a postscript, tantalizingly brief: "Had another try to pick up traces of Captain Jim; was three months out, but couldn't locate the creek. Had a long-range scrap with nigs before I cleared."

He had written long ago explaining his previous failure, setting it down to his own lack of endurance and the unexpected hostility of a native tribe. He did not even mention that he had been speared on this occasion, not knowing that the fact had been cabled.

Mrs. Notley's gratitude to her laconic correspondent was unbounded.

"Your father said that he was one of nature's gentlemen," she said, handing the letter to her son, when he came home in the late afternoon, "and he spoke truly—a gentle man, the noblest work of God!"

"Oh, Mother," burst out Stuart, "if I could only join him! I'm sure he'd help me to—to—— Oh, you know what I mean!"

"Yes, I know," she answered quietly. "I have known for a long time what has been in my boy's heart. But where a grown man has failed——?"

He turned aside to hide his disappointment. He had forgotten that the whereabouts of the creek of diamonds

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was unknown to him except in a sense too wide to be of service. Tanami Charlie's efforts had proved this much—and *he* was a bushman, with a navigator's instinct if without his knowledge.

She watched him for a time with anxious eyes. She feared to let him go from her, even to Tanami's care, for he was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.

He went upstairs to his old playroom. He meant to remove the sextant and rifle and hide them from his sight. They reminded him so persistently of his boyish promise. The lumber chest in the corner attracted his attention. It was big enough for his purpose. In it were stored scarce-remembered relics of earlier years, remnants they were mostly, broken toys, and almost leafless picture books, long long ago discarded. Grimly he lugged the case nearer the window. There was not space enough for the addition he would make to the collection, and after a moment's hesitation he applied his foot to the chest and toppled its contents out over the floor. He was not quite sure why he did this: the impulse just came to him; he was not even conscious of momentary temper. Among a miscellany of teddy bears, mechanical trains, model ships, and squeaking animals of all descriptions, there tinkled forth a small nickel-plated cylindrical box, not quite so large as an ordinary bobbin of cotton. It rolled over the carpet and came to rest in the shadows near the door.

At the sight of it vague memories stirred in him, and through a confusing medley of thought and associations

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his mind groped back and found the clue it sought. It was the plaything his dad had given him in the dim past, and—yes—within its shining surface there once had been a dully glittering pebble on which his parents had set much store. "It must have been the diamond!" he whispered in an awed voice. For a moment his object in coming into the room was forgotten; he picked up the little cylinder, and pulled off the cap. Of course it was empty, for the stone it had enclosed was now a sparkling jewel in his mother's keeping. Yet it was not quite empty after all; a tiny round of paper was inside, and this he idly tapped out on his open palm. Five seconds later, his triumphant shout echoed through the house.

"I've found it! I've found it! I've found it!"

His sister was the first to appear, breathless in her haste. He was gazing as if entranced at a small curving piece of cartridge paper, and every now and then a chuckle broke from his lips. She gave him a good shake to break the spell.

"Found what, silly?" she demanded, then, noticing the litter created, she questioned further and earnestly: "You haven't gone—gone dotty, have you, stupid?"

"Twenty-one three, a hundred and thirty-two," he repeated, for the first time unconscious of her pleasantries. "Now we'll see if I'm a man or not!"

Following his glance, Laurel saw that the paper had some dim writing upon it. Peering closely, she read aloud:

"Latitude, twenty-one degrees, three minutes.

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Longitude, one hundred and thirty degrees, two minutes."

Her brother, returned from the clouds, spoke calmly in explanation.

"That's Dad's own writing, Sis, an' the figures show the place where he got Mother's big diamond. Now I know where to go, an' I don't think Mother will want to keep me back when she understands."

He reached for the rifle, suspended on the wall. "I don't want to kill *anything*," he muttered, "but blacks aren't going to stop me."

Laurel looked a little frightened.

"Put that horrid thing away!" she cried. "It looks—it looks wicked."

Nothing would content him now but to draw the sextant from its case, and exhibit its mysteries to the astonished girl. He had become wonderfully proficient in the use of the instrument, under the tuition of a retired sea captain who lived near at hand. His mother had not cared to damp his ardour in this pet study of his; she did not dream that a mere boy could ever grasp a subject of such apparent intricacy, but here she reckoned without the will of the youthful student. Perseverance opened the way for him, and his own strong bent did the rest.

He did not hear his mother enter the room; she had followed close after his sister, and for fully a minute had listened to his eager talk, her heart beating heavily in her breast. Now she came forward from the shadows.

"My son," she said very softly, "it has been God's

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will that you should find the paper which has been hidden away so many years. I did not know it was there, and your dear father, I'm sure, had forgotten it. Now I know that it would be wrong to keep you here. You will go to your father's old comrade, with my blessing. In his goodness he will not allow a mother's only son to sacrifice his life in the wilderness——"

She fumbled in her purse with unsteady hands. "Here," she continued, holding out a large gem that emitted flashing rays, "is the means for your journey. Your father considered it valuable—to me it is priceless; but it is fitting that the diamond that cost the father's life should be used by the son on his noble purpose."

"Oh, Mother," cried the boy, throwing his strong arms around her, "I'll go because I promised—and because I *must* know what has happened to dear old Dad. But I can't take money from you, Mother, when you have so little. I can't——"

She interrupted him firmly.

"I wish it, Stuart," she said. "Your father's friend has provided enough to make my own little income eke out—until—until you come back."

He did not argue further. He prayed that he might be able to be back soon. It would be his first venture out into the big world. With God's help he would acquit himself like a man, and return with honour.

Downstairs Laurel was holding earnest conversation with Bob Murray. That young man was much concerned by the portentous tidings which had burst

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involuntarily from her lips. Stuart was going away to a country of Diamonds and Savages! Yes, he had heard a suggestion of this before—many times—from the boy himself, but it had always been a shadowy scheme dependent on so many other happenings. Now, according to his excited informant, the matter had suddenly become serious. His face flamed under an emotion that he could not control.

"Hang it all, Laurell!" he spluttered, "I want to be in this——"

She straightway began to weep.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she sobbed. "You'll both go away, and—and you'll be boiled and eaten by the can—cannibals——"

He was touched by her consideration; but she had not quite finished. "But maybe they won't boil you *very* much, 'cause they'll think you've been done before."

He groaned lugubriously, but laughed all the same.

"It's goin' to be dashed hard to make a hero out of me," he admitted. "My peony complexion cooks my goose at the start."

She was all contrition on the instant, and, hearing her brother coming, made prompt and ample amends while yet there was time: "I think you'd be just splendid, even if your face was—green," she whispered generously and with desperate finality.

Bob at first could see nothing to prevent him accompanying his chum to Australia. His father, he

thought, would offer no objection to his going, for he often said that travel was necessary to broaden one's outlook. Mrs. Notley, however, pointed out that Stuart's journey would lead him into an almost unknown land, and would involve all sorts of risks not usually undertaken willingly by young men who make the *grand tour* for educational purposes alone. The possible finding of a fortune in diamonds at the end of the trail she would not consider at all, though both Stuart and Bob thought this a most reasonable and mightily fascinating feature.

Bob became very downhearted; it was clear to him that if Mrs. Notley could draw no encouraging picture for him, there was less likelihood of his father concurring with his optimistic views. His honest soul was troubled, and he racked his brains to find an argument that might be convincing in his cause. And at last inspiration came to him.

"The Mastodon!" he cried, leaping from his chair. "The very thing! Stuart, old sport, the deed's did. I'll be your assistant for a cert! Oh, won't the pater be pleased!"

Stuart's eyes opened wide in amazement, then he, too, jumped to his feet, as excited as the other.

"You don't think——?" he stammered.

"Think? I'm sure! Just imagine how this sort of thing would cheer him up——" He struck an attitude and read from an imaginary paper: "Murray's Mastodon, model A, has made the most marvellous journey in the annals of the motor industry. It has

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penetrated the unknown heart of Australia, crossing a thousand miles of country where it was deadly to venture even with camel teams, and successfully returned to its base. At the wheel of the Mastodon was the inventor's trusted young engineer, Stuart Notley, and he was ably assisted by——"

He stopped, and looked around for approval. Stuart laughed joyously.

"There would be more even than that to tell, Bob, but it sounds too good to think about. Your father would never dream of giving me such a chance?"

"Wouldn't he just? I know what the pater thinks of you, an' he'll be tickled to death, as the American's say. 'Tisn't too late. We'll go along and see him. Come on!"

The pair dashed madly out of the house, leaving Mrs. Notley aghast at the suddenness of their decision. But she smiled to herself when they were gone.

"Impetuous youth!" she murmured. "The whole world is at the feet of impetuous youth."

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CHAPTER III

Tanami Charlie "at Home"

Over the wide sweeping plains of the Northern Territory a single horseman rode. His swag, containing a coloured blanket and a tent fly, was bound in a neat roll across the pommel of the saddle, but attached to the seat and suspended against the animal's flanks were sundry impedimenta that at once betrayed the bushman "on the Wallaby". There was the inevitable billy for making tea, and to its iron handle an enamelled pint mug attached itself through the medium of a twisted strand of wire. On the same side a gold pan swung, cunningly tethered by unseen means to the saddle rings. As a counterpoise, a miner's pick and short shovel, tied together by a piece of bagging, dangled in the off direction. To complete its equipment, a curved water-bag fitted around the horse's neck and rested on its shoulders. Of foodstuffs there appeared no evidence; these were carried within the billy—a frugal supply of flour and tea, sugar and salt—bare necessities for a short journey. But the rider carried a rifle which he shifted from hand to hand, sometimes resting the butt on his foot when his muscles

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grew tired, and by this rifle and the sureness of his eye he practically lived on the country he traversed.

The man himself looked a part of his bizarre surroundings. He was lean and loose-limbed, evidently above middle height, with a face that was in repose half grim and half playful in expression. He had a thick fair moustache which drooped slightly, giving his countenance a suggestion of melancholy. His cheeks were tanned so deeply that they appeared of the texture of burnished leather, and under shaggy fringes the eyes looked out upon the world with an unwavering steadiness that bespoke the child of far horizons. His age would have been hard to determine; it might have been around the thirties, or perhaps a little over. His dress was simplicity itself. He wore tight-fitting nether garments of an ancient model, which had obviously seen much service. A raw hide belt held these in position; a cotton shirt, wide open at the neck, disclosed the swelling chest. His feet were encased in loose-fitting boots with elastic sides—the kind our grandmothers used to wear—for these lend support to the ankle when the foot is long in the stirrups. His hat was indeed barely a hat at all; it was a battered remnant of what might once have been a decent enough covering of the slouch variety. Now its rim, by much pulling, hung limp and irregular.

As the horseman ambled on, he hummed to himself a ditty of weird cadence in a minor key, to which the jangle of his steed's accoutrement made apt accompaniment. It was the Bushman's Song he sung, a con-

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ception of the wildest fantasy with an alluring syncopating air that sychronized at different phases with the movements of a horse at any pace, from a slow walk to a furious gallop. The patient beast which he bestrode pricked up his ears at the first alarm. Well he knew what was coming. And it came. Unconsciously the singer conveyed through his spurred heel the varying impulse of the melody. Soon the amble became a canter which shortly merged into a thunderous gallop, then ensued a brief respite while the succeeding verse meandered and gathered strength, to culminate as before in a valkyrie rush that demanded so much of equine effort.

It was early afternoon and the sun blazed down from a sky in which not the suspicion of a cloud could be seen. Waves of heat seemed to suspend in mid-air and scorched like the glow of an open furnace. The stunted trees that dotted the landscape were gnarled, shrunk, and shadeless; the sparse and spiky vegetation under foot was dry as tinder and brittle as glass. It had been a bad season for rain in these parts. The tropical showers had not descended much beyond the coast, and even wild life could now find little sustenance on the arid plains.

The soloist ceased his vocal exercises long before he had exhausted his plaintive subject. A line of white in the far westward distance had attracted his attention.

"Well I'm jiggered!" he muttered. "That must be Pine Creek, ahead. Had no idea I was so near the

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blinkin' place. Hang it all, I must have been kickin' the old hoss along something cruel. I ain't fit to be trusted wi' a decent nag——"

He drew rein, slithered from his perch, and went forward to pat the animal's nose.

"All the same, Rocket," he continued, addressing his dumb listener, "I'll give ye a spell right now. I'll walk for a bit, an' you can chase me up an' bite me if I don't go fast enough."

He started off to plod through the heavy sands that at this stage intervened, and accomplished a good mile before his conscience would allow him to ride again. It was fully an hour before he arrived at the outskirts of the camp, and then his senses became conscious of a well-recognized thrill. Here and there a tent was being dismantled. Men were rushing about in excitement. Horses were being saddled, and vehicles of all descriptions appeared as if magically evolved from the air. There was no noise accompanying all this motion. The whole scene was as a panoramic vision, silent and impressive.

The new-comer's unostentatious progress into the midst of the picture might have passed unobserved had his own interest not been so thoroughly aroused. He halted indecisively, the shadow of a frown crossing his features.

"Looks like the makin's o' a dandy rush," he grumbled, "an' me not in it!"

A man hastening past looked at him curiously, then stopped and gave a yell of recognition.

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"I'll be blowed if it ain't Tanami Charlie," he exclaimed, "an' we thought he was a goner!"

"Tain't very surprisin' to see me pokin' round, is it," returned the other coolly, "seeing as I got my label 'bout here? What's the merry party for?"

But the first speaker was already crowded aside by a jostling throng more eager to get than to give information. Most of those present knew Tanami Charlie only as a name, but it had magic in it at the moment, for a fresh gold strike had been made near the blistering little township of Tanami, and who better than the pioneer of the field should be able to advise them concerning it. A great nugget had been found in a gully to the westward of the camp, but the finder had disappeared after giving the gold to the bank, and only vaguely indefinite news had filtered out to the clamorous public regarding its supposed place of origin. Charlie's appearance from the void at this particular juncture was significant. He must know——

"Not guilty, boys," said the bushman, when he saw the trend of remarks. "I've pushed my little cart over from Queensland. I ain't no explorer, so I dodged the sand patch to the south an' only blew in here casual-like, headin' for Darwin."

If they had any further doubts regarding him, they were soon dispelled, for the old lure was now upon him. He wanted more than any of them to follow this new trail. He slid from his horse.

"I reckon the whole country must ha' had notis o'

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this flamin' rush," he complained, "an' I hate to be in last."

He walked over to the telegraph office, cogitating deeply, leaving Rocket to his own devices.

A quarter of an hour later he emerged, feeling considerably comforted, having spoiled many "forms" before the message he wished to send read clearly to his comprehension; it was addressed to Stuart Notley, on board the steamer *Montoro*, and this is what it said:

"Welcome to Australia. Got fever bad. Going Tanami. Hold on till I come. Won't be long—Charlie."

In a land of vast distances a few hundred miles are considered as nothing if there is any possible method of locomotion. In this case the centre of attraction to the multitude was full four hundred miles distant. The men had gathered here mysteriously from numerous outlying points of the continent. The whisper had gone forth that gold in abundance had been discovered in the far-off desert sands, and the response was immediate. Not many hoped to make a fortune; it was the glamour that drew them, even as at the last moment it entered the soul of Tanami Charlie, surely one of the least mercenary men in the whole world.

Having sent the telegram, he permitted himself the pleasing vision of glorious success awaiting him with open arms at the end of the weary trail. He had these visions rather frequently; indeed, he could not remember when they hadn't been a part of his optimistic

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outfit, though until a short time ago he would have had no idea what to do with embarrassing riches had they really come his way. Now things were different; he had Captain Jim's son to think about, and he must not forget the boy's mother, who had so shown her faith in him.

So he stood on the steps of the little wooden post office, and thought of all he would do with the rest of the gold left in the gully so far away. A horse rolling delightedly in the sand out on the roadway caught his eye, and he smiled.

"Havin' a bath afore he starts out," he commented. "I reckon that is real hoss sense."

He caught sight of a saddle on the animal's back.

"This gold business does make some folk darn foolish," he reflected wisely, "any howlin' idiot should have known never to leave a hoss loose wi' a saddle—an' a billy—an' a gold pan—! Smashin' the whole blinkin' crockery an' me watchin'! Woal! Rocket, ye darn fool. Woal!"

Realization had dawned on him a shade late, but he rushed forward in time to minimize the damage.

It did not surprise Tanami in the least that a new strike should have been made in the vicinity of his old haunts. Where gold was concerned, Nature sometimes played strange tricks, hiding her choicest treasure in the most unlikely places, where the uninitiated was more likely to find it than the experienced miner. He blamed himself just a little for missing a reef that was rich enough to shed nuggets into a gully. As for

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the disappearance of the alleged discoverers, he did not attach any importance to that. They had probably gone back to work the mine in secret. But then again, the Warden's office would have had a record of the locality if the find had been registered!

"Mighty funny," he soliloquized. "Must be a Dago crowd, frightened to death that any other poor devil might get a share." "Dago" was with him a term of reproach applied to all men who were not of the Anglo-Saxon race; in this respect the Bushman was insular to the finger tips.

By the time he had replenished his stores, and given himself and Rocket some necessary refreshment, it was close on sundown.

The roadway was now deserted, for the rush had melted away into the southern horizon, where it still could be seen like a straggling army on the march.

The hotel proprietor became confidential.

"This new diskivery 'll mean a lot to me," he said, while Tanami was tightening the saddle girths.

Tanami gave a non-committal grunt.

"I ain't very sorry for pub-keepers, but I suppose they're sort o' human after all. If the place booms I reckon you'll get fatter'n ever——"

"If it booms, I'm a goner for good and all," the other returned sadly, "for the Government would extend the railway, an' leave me perishin' on the roadside wi' all the good money goin' past in trains—But say, you're not hittin' the trail right away?"—for Tanami had placed his toe in the stirrup. "It'll be

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as dark as Hades in half an hour. You won't be able to pick up the track."

"Rocket an' me don't need tracks, old man."

He was gone without more ado. He knew a native well at which he would camp that night; a poky room in a hotel was but a poor substitute for the wide vault of heaven, and, besides, the "rush" was ahead! He was at the wrong end of it. He meant to correct such an unthinkable state of affairs.

But what of his horse? Could Rocket hold out? This was the disturbing feature in his calculations. The wiry beast that had just completed one long journey could scarcely be expected to do much farther travel without a rest. Consideration for the animal struggled with the urge of the quest, and a compromise was reached. He would walk when his mount showed signs of distress, and leave Rocket to recuperate until he returned. Tanami thought nothing of walking, only he could not carry his prospecting implements, and, of course, his pace would be slower. Nevertheless he viewed the probable situation ahead with equanimity. He was in the "rush", that was the main thing. He would get to his goal somehow.

He camped towards midnight, twenty-five miles on the way as he had come, but thirty by the bush track which others usually followed. Here, at the native well he had fixed upon as his halting-place, he overtook the bulk of those who had left hours before him. Only half a dozen buggies, some motors, and, perhaps, a score of cyclists were yet ahead, so he was

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told. He turned his horse loose, lay down on his blanket, and was immediately fast asleep.

Next day he overtook one of the motors in a sand patch, and a little farther on he passed a cyclist sitting by the track, making repairs, but that was all of human kind he saw before nightfall. On the third morning Rocket's distance-covering amble brought him to a disabled four-wheeler, and then in quick succession he jogged past quite a stream of strenuous traffic. The motors all but one were still in front, but he did not consider motorists as serious rivals. There was a lengthy patch of bad country still well ahead where he expected to find the whole bunch of them.

He was right; they were there, a round dozen or more, each on a track of its own over a wide space, and all boiling and panting tumultuously but making no forward movement. Some of the men were busy trying to clear away the surface sand when Tanami approached. They were attacking it with shovels and much energy. The horseman gazed at them sympathetically.

"If the jiggers won't jig, mates," said he, "you shi'd save your wind an' walk. It's twenty miles to the next water."

They misunderstood his earnest meaning, and answered him wrathfully in many voices, the purport of which was that their chariots would soon catch him up and leave him ignominiously behind. He shook his head at their lack of wisdom and gravely plodded on. Rocket had been weakening under him for some

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time, and now the heavy country was telling sorely on the game animal. Soon he began to falter in his stride and stumble without obvious cause.

"'Tain't no good, old hoss," spoke Tanami; "you've done your dash an' the rest is up to me."

He climbed down from the saddle, and with barely a halt proceeded on foot, the horse following after him as a dog might have done. He made up his mind to leave Rocket at the next soak, and go on alone. He had still a hundred and fifty miles to negotiate. He calculated roughly that he might accomplish this in another five days. He mused philosophically, as he laboriously plugged forward, on the vanity of human effort. These motors behind, he reasoned, could not possibly get through, and many of the traps and buckboards that had so gaily started would never reach the end of the journey. It did not occur to him that his own plight was in any way to be pitied. On the contrary he considered himself more than fortunate.

"Here's me," he gloated mildly, "wi' two darn good legs that need exercise, an' nary a thing to worry about."

He seemed oblivious of the rays of the scorching sun, and he warded off besieging flies mechanically and without thought. The heated sand soon made its fiery influence felt through the thin soles of his light boots, and he reminded himself reproachfully that he had shown little sense in not having anticipated this inevitable happening. He cheered up, however,

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when he recollected that heavier footwear might have impeded his progress, and in a little while he forgot the trivial discomfort he endured. Mile after mile he traversed, and his ruminations, after having revolved around many subjects, fixed upon the fate of the man he had accompanied all these years back across the unknown wilderness.

"A mighty good man was Jim Notley," he reflected sadly. "An' I would give my blessed hide to pick up some trace o' him. But I've tried. God knows I've tried—an'—I'll try again afore I get much older——"

Suddenly he stopped, and a surprised look came into his face. A faint whirring sound was borne to his ears from the dim distance whence he had come.

"It's one o' them perishin' jiggers," he muttered, "an' I would have bet my hat that it couldn't be done."

For a moment he was tempted to get on Rocket's back once again. He realized that he had a reluctance to be passed. The mood faded when the horse approached to his call.

"I promised I'd walk, an' I ain't goin' to go back on it," he said to himself sternly, and he doggedly resumed his march.

The whirring noise increased. At intervals it swelled into a roar, reminiscent of days when one watched the sky with anxious interest for the man-made vultures of death which hovered over the trenches.

Tanami looked into the heavens now, but not a speck marred the azure dome above. Curiously he

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waited. His eyes roved searchingly over the wide sands and rested on a moving object ever so far away. A faint cloud of yellow accompanied its advance.

"Cripes!" he ejaculated, "them shovellers are a lively lot after all. No wonder they were sore wi' me for sayin' they couldn't do it!"

Almost at once he saw his surmise was false; the approaching vehicle was making rapid headway, and with no preceding aid. Nearer and nearer it loomed, disclosing quickly that it was no ordinary motor that was so easily conquering the wastes. It appeared to leap forward in a series of swift gliding undulations, devouring the sand in its passage and spurning it behind, so that a wake like that created by a ship's propeller followed its advance. It had no bodywork like an ordinary car; it was low set, and curving like a shell, and all metallic and shiny. The heads of two begoggled figures protruded from an alcove in the centre of the machine.

This much Tanami Charlie took in.

"It's a tank!" he gasped. "A blessed baby tank! Spare m' days, it'll run over us in a blinkin' minute."

He leaned heavily against Rocket's flank, in helpless amazement, and that poor creature, so tired that it was taking no interest in events, nearly fell down. He was almost certain he heard someone laugh. The roar of the engine had been suddenly subdued, and the mechanical oddity was lurching to a stop. Tanami looked at the two occupants severely, wondering which of them had laughed. He could not distinguish

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their features owing to their generous coating of dust, but two pairs of youthful eyes looked out at him from their protecting coverings.

"It's all right, boys," he said pleasantly, "don't be afraid o' frightening the old hoss. He ain't in the mood to be interested. I reckon you're goin' to be in first wi' that snorter."

The figure at the wheel spoke.

"We're not trying a race," he said in a clear voice. "We're on the way to Tanami to see a friend who is sick. We left Darwin yesterday——"

"Yesterday? Centipedes an' caterpillars!"

The second occupant of the car immediately appeared annoyed.

"No sir!" he corrected. "This is *not* a Centipedan Caterpillar. This is the original Mastodon—Murray's Mastodon. The Centipedan, I'm quite certain, is only a poor copy."

The bushman's face showed bewilderment; he could not imagine how he had offended. The first speaker meanwhile was nudging his companion vigorously, so that the flow of eloquence ceased abruptly.

"Bob here—that is my mate—is a bit rusty on Caterpillars," he explained, tapping the accelerator impatiently with his foot. "We only stopped because we thought you needed help."

"Help! Me? The old hoss has 'bout shot his bolt, but *my* machinery's all right."

The driver nodded, and pulled at the gear lever, then a thought seemed to strike him.

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"Is there anything much worse 'n this ahead?" he asked earnestly. "You see, our friend may be *very* ill, an' I want to get through to-night. I thought everyone would know him in this country, but nobody can tell me anything about him."

"The man who keeps the pub at Pine Creek said he never heard of Mr. Henley," added the individual called Bob.

Tanami Charlie pondered for an instant.

"Henley?" he muttered; "Mr. Henley! Why, darn it, that's *my* go-to-meetin' handle!"

The yell that followed staggered him, and both inmates of the car started to climb out of their recessed seats at opposite sides. The taller of the two tore off his goggles. Tanami Charlie thought it was a wraith that came to him with hand outstretched, a rejuvenated wraith.

"Jim!" he gasped, "Jim Notley——"

"His son," answered the youth simply. Then the scales fell from Tanami Charlie's eyes, and Stuart Notley's hand was seized in a steel-like grip.

The Mastodon lay gently panting in its tracks. Rocket with bowed head stood near, and Bob, after his first cheery greeting, went over and stroked the poor brute's trembling nostrils. Stuart and his new-found friend had much to talk about; they did not seem to mind the glare of the sun upon their heads, but Bob was hot—very hot—and mopped the perspiration from his brow continually. He was discovering that his generous waist-line had disadvantages

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unanticipated. He felt that he was slowly melting like an over-heated candle. But at last a movement was to be made. Tanami Charlie was approaching him; Stuart had gone to look for a letter packed somewhere in the car.

A smile illuminated the bushman's gaunt features as he spoke:

"That there—Caterpillar is a bosker, Bob. There can't be nothin' to touch it in the world."

Bob was delighted. Testimony such as this pleased him mightily; Mr. Henley, he thought, was not such a back number as he looked. He hesitated before he asked the crucial question:

"Do you think it could cross the Sahara, Mr. Henley?"

Mr. Henley was puzzled. He had heard that name before, but he could not recollect whether it was a river or a mountain.

"Sahara?" he repeated, "Sahara! Would take it in its stride, my lad. Never notice it. Fact is, I got kind o' bushed wi' the Henley tag. Seemed as if ye were speakin' to somebody else. That blinkin' 'bus would just galumph over Sahara——"

"Thanks—Charlie," said Bob. "I'll write an' tell the pater. He'll be awfully bucked!"

It was arranged that the Mastodon should proceed as far as the next water-hole, and there await Charlie's arrival, for the bushman could not trust his horse to follow in its spent condition; besides, he wanted to do a bit of hard thinking. He had been given two

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companions instead of the one expected, two young men of forceful energy whose unspoken scheme was just beginning to dawn on him. He had forgotten to ask why they had imagined him to be seriously ill, and Stuart had been so glad to see him actually in the flesh, that the cause of the Mastodon's flying journey for the moment fled from that young man's memory also. But Bob had had time to size up the position. He thought he saw something humorous in it, so just before he swung into his seat he asked solicitously regarding the health of the patient.

"I s'pose," he said, with one optic closed tightly, "it was Henley who was sick, an' Charlie took him out for a walk."

"Sick?" questioned Charlie. "Darn it, young 'un, I wanted to ask afore what ye meant——"

"Your telegram mentioned fever," added Stuart, "but I'm so awfully glad you've recovered."

The rugged face of the unwitting culprit became downcast.

"An' I was so very careful 'bout that wire," he muttered. "Reckoned it was plain as a nigger's face. It weren't malaria fever I meant, neither was it scarlet fever, nor measles. It was gold-fever, an' I ain't recovered yet. It's got me pretty bad——"

The boys laughed uproariously. Stuart slipped in the gears, and the uncouth car slowly gathered way, leaving behind a very crestfallen individual who still failed to see the joke he had unconsciously perpetrated.

Left alone, he took from his belt the letter Stuart

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had brought from his mother. He opened the envelope with great care, then laboriously began to master the contents. Mrs. Notley had taken pains to write large and legibly, but the reader deciphered it with difficulty. When the end came he straightened his shoulders and looked unseeingly towards the far horizon.

"Yes, Mrs. Jim," he said slowly, "I'll look after the boy."

He repeated this sentence several times, then, leading Rocket by the bridle, he strode after the Mastodon.

That night, around the camp fire, he held earnest converse with the boys. Never ready with his speech, his halting sentences, simple in their brevity, failed to impress on his youthful hearers the note of warning he strove to sound. His own experiences, so modestly related, became narratives of travel in which the speaker played but insignificant part. The gaps he left unbridged were many. He would not, even if he could, make much of his own exploits. Only when he told the story of Jim Notley's first expedition did he give any graphic description of dangers encountered on the trail; in his zeal to do justice to his companion's memory he became suddenly possessed of a rugged eloquence which thrilled the boys; yet they saw only romance where he would have pictured the grimmest of perils.

"I didn't calc'late them diamonds were any good," he concluded, addressing Stuart, "but your Dad reckoned diff'rent, an' 'peared to think we'd make

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fortunes out'n the creek—some day. He had two biggish bits o' the stuff, an' he halved wi' me, though I didn't want the darn thing."

"And have you got it still?" Stuart asked breathlessly.

Tanami groped about in his tobacco-pouch, and calmly displayed the treasure he despised.

"I keep it for *luck*," he said, "an' goodness knows why I didn't heave the flamin' thing away. Every time I look at it I get the creeps——"

Stuart could keep his news back no longer.

"I sold Dad's diamond for a hundred and twenty pounds," he cried, "an' the man asked me where I got it. He wrote to Mother just before we came away and said that the stone was like some others he had got from Australia *from the same place*. Wait, I'll get the letter; Mother said to show it to you——"

He rose hurriedly and ran off to get his suitcase from the car, leaving the man dazed with astonishment.

"A hundred an' twenty golden goblins; thirty ounces o' the best Australian for a perishin' coloured pebble! Jim Notley was right an' I was the thickhead—as usual. A hundred an' twenty shinin' jimmies!"

Bob, who was half dozing by the burning logs, turned around sleepily. He was half expecting complications to set in, and that Tanami would add diamond fever to his list of diseases.

When Stuart returned into the firelight, the bushman was abstractedly trying to light his pipe from a glowing ember which he held over the bowl, sucking fiercely

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but ineffectively the while. He desisted on the boy's appearance, for his inquiring finger had just proved that a non-combustible substance was blocking his efforts. He tapped the rough diamond out on his palm with a grunt of disgust.

"I've got the brains o' a 'goanna," he grumbled. "Can't stand them sudden shocks."

At his direction Stuart read aloud the communication received from the London diamond merchant. In the beginning it referred to the purchase of Notley's diamond by one of his many agents, and then proceeded to comment on the fact that an odd lustre in the stone identified it as probably coming from the same quarter as a parcel received some time before from an Australian source. "If you are in touch with the owner of this property," the letter concluded, "I shall be glad if you will let me have his address, which he neglected to leave at my office when he called."

The bushman got up hastily, and retreated into the darkness, mumbling strange sounds. The boy, startled, was about to go after him to inquire the cause of his odd behaviour, but he heard Charlie's voice addressing someone out in the night. Evidently, Stuart reasoned, some unwelcome visitor had reached the camp, though he had heard no one arrive. Another kind of explanation, however, was soon forthcoming. Charlie came back and sat down on the log he had vacated as if no interruption had taken place.

"What did Mrs. Jim say?" he demanded suddenly, without looking up.

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"She said that she thought that diamonds were all alike, but that *you* would know——"

"And what d'you think of it, Stuart?" Charlie's voice sounded quite stern.

"I don't know what to think," the boy said with hesitation. "It looks as if someone else has found the place."

The bushman again rose up, but reseated himself with an obvious effort.

"What *I* thought, my lad, I said—outside, for I promised Mrs. Jim that you wouldn't hear cuss words from me—an' I ain't a liar. That—perishin' Dago must ha' saved his own hide someway an' got clear. 'Tain't likely he'd ever try to go back, or the crows would be pickin' his bones by now. Such miserable swine follow like dingoes, but they ain't got the heart to do a man's job."

He relapsed into moody silence. Stuart came to him, and touched his shoulder almost timidly.

"I know the position of the creek," he said in a low voice, "an' I've got Dad's sextant. I've come to find out what happened to him. Boy or no boy, I'm goin' to do it——"

The man gazing into the fire stirred uneasily. He was thinking now of the boy's mother, and of her trust in him.

"I ain't afraid of the trail, lad," he broke out; "I ain't afraid of anything on God's earth—though, if the blacks get us, what would your mother think o' me? But I'm goin', lad. It'll be Tanami Charlie's last trail,

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I reckon. Mebbe it'll come all right in the end."

Bob had been having a nap, and in a short period a wonderful panoramic vision had appeared to his subconscious mind. He saw hordes of blacks in hot pursuit of a hundred and twenty golden goblins who were scurrying about in all directions, making frantic efforts to escape. But one of the pursued lagged behind. He was a very rotund little figure, and drops of gilt were oozing from his shiny body as he ran. The foremost savage poised his spear and—Bob awoke with a shudder, calling out for the Mastodon to come to the rescue.

Tanami took up the word. "Cripes! you're right, Bob," he said; "that there caterpillar should make a lot o' difference if it can carry the stores. Thought you was asleep, young feller——?"

"'Twas only a rumour, Charlie," the youth replied, "an' not strictly 'cording to fact. I was just thinking o' those hundred and twenty golden goblins."

CHAPTER IV

The Rush at Angel Gully

Angel Gully was the name of an ancient water-course that tore across the gravelly plains some twenty miles or so to the east of the comparatively recently established township of Tanami. At first much was expected of the Tanami district; it had nearly all the elements that go towards the making of a successful gold-field; it was remote, accessible practically only from one direction—and even then with the greatest difficulty—and of natural advantages there were none. In most cases such deterrent features are welcomed by those who follow the gold lure. There is a proverb much in use nowadays which says that “distant hills are always greenest”. In this particular quarter the prevailing hue is not green at all, but then there are occasions when one becomes curiously colour-blind. The fact stands out that Nature’s riches are, oftener than not, set in distant places, and man responds with strange fervour to the romantic appeal of the unknown.

But this northern corner of the Australian continent had not yet fulfilled its promise. Despite not infre-

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quent "rushes" and sundry minor excitements, it remained a pioneers' field, where hardy men still toiled for a minimum of return, buoyed up always by the sure conviction that, sooner or later, the place would boom and become a second Kalgoorlie.

Angel Gully was but a slight gash in the burnt plateau on the edge of the "Never Never". Its title was bestowed by a forgotten explorer, in some mad freak of fancy, and it was marked on the map before any habitation existed within hundreds of miles. There was certainly nothing angelic about it. Not even a colour of gold had been found in the vicinity, and water had not been known to flow in the channel within the memory of man. Yet this was to be the scene of the new rush, for it is the unexpected that often happens, and the unexpected has a glamour that is denied to merely reasonable occurrences.

On the day when the first definite news of the "find" had been mysteriously spread abroad, two men were encamped in the bed of Angel Gully. The ridge of their tent just showed level with the banks of the creek, and could not be seen even a short distance away. They had built for themselves a windbreak of branches, such as wandering aborigines use when on their nomadic travels, and this sheltered them from the afternoon sun, and also obscured the white calico tent from view should anyone approach from the west, which was the only direction from which white men, at any rate, could be expected to come.

A blackfellows' smoke, which means the tiniest fire

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that can possibly be kept alight, was smouldering near at hand, surrounded by the simple cooking utensils invariably used by prospectors. A horse in "hobbles" limped slowly away from the camp along the channel. The imprint of a saddle was fresh on its back, and a salty crust was beginning to form on its flanks where foam had recently been.

At the moment the owners of the camp were nowhere to be seen, as if they too were shunning the prying eyes of possible observers. Their voices, however, could be heard within the tent, whence also came an occasional thud, as of a pick-axe at work. Soon the flap of the calico enclosure was thrust aside, and a man emerged evidently in high spirits. He was a sallow-faced individual with dark furtive eyes, and a slightly crooked mouth. He was clean-shaven, slim of build, and dressed in exaggerated mining garb. This personage was known as "Slim Smith" to the community of the settlement a score of miles away. The appellation was not intended as a reflection on his moral outlook, though it is true most of his acquaintances suspected that it would fit him "both ways". He had blown in to the district two years or so ago, and after some delay had set himself up as a "Mining Financier", but he had never been known to finance anyone. Now his unprepossessing features were wreathed in smiles, and he clasped and unclasped his hands exultingly.

"Come along, Bradley," he called out. "I want a drink of tea before I start back. My throat is like a sponge."

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"You didn't do any worryin' 'bout *my* throat," came back the sulky growl. "I could swallow a gallon o' the best, an' ye bring me—water! Does ye think I'm a frog?"

There came the clang of a shovel being thrown on the ground and the man addressed as Bradley appeared, still furiously lamenting his arid state. He looked the typical miner gone wrong through drink. His watery eyes and fiery nose proclaimed his weakness.

"You can drown yourself in the stuff if you like when we get this job through," said Slim Smith airily, "but until then, Bradley, old man, it's the water wagon for you. Another week should do it, and you've *got* to be able to explain the mine to the—visitors, when they roll up."

"Another week!" moaned Bradley. "Ain't ye registered the gory claim yet?"

Slim Smith smiled craftily.

"Regulations allow seven clear days after pegging, and who's to tell when the posts went in? I want to give the folks—outside—a chance to get along. It's the greenhorns who've got the money, I tell you. We'd never get anything from them hard-boiled citizens in Tanami." He stopped and laughed outright before continuing: "I've got them going some, Bradley; they're digging up the country—to the west!"

"They might *find* something there," said Bradley. "When I was out Mount Cornish way I saw some likely looking——"

"Forget it!" snapped the other, with sudden irri-

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tation. "You've never heard of a big strike being made where the mob *thought* it was. Angel Gully is the place that will tickle 'em to death."

Bradley put the billy on to boil without another word. His thoughts were exactly a week and a day ahead. He was a miner—sometimes; but a financier—never. Only one matter—outside his perennial craving—now troubled him, and this he brought up while Slim Smith was gulping down the tea prepared for him.

"'Cordin' to agreement, boss, when the mine bottomed on good gold, you was to hand out the boodle. Twenty ounces an' twelve grains o' the best at four pounds two shillin's—that makes eighty-five jimmies——"

"No, it doesn't," interrupted the tea drinker crossly, "but I've brought the money with me——"

He drew from his hip pocket a roll of notes and counted them one by one into the grimy hand of the miner.

"That's sixteen fives and two singles, and"—as the expectant fist still waited—"half a dollar."

The coin he abstracted from another pocket and thrust it on top of the pile of paper.

"I'll lose a mighty sight more than that odd half-dollar when I sell the stuff," he grumbled.

Bradley became unexpectedly sympathetic. "I reckon you will," he admitted, but he put the florin in his own pocket nevertheless.

Slim Smith left the camp just an hour before sun-

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down. He did not wish to reach the township until well after dark. Before riding off he gave his partner a final warning.

"If the Rush comes ahead o' my reckoning and I don't get a chance of giving you the tip, show the mine to nobody until I stroll along. *Remember you promised me first offer.*"

The miner went back to the tent. He had to climb over a considerable heap of debris immediately he entered, and then he found himself gazing into a neat rectangular pit about five feet in depth, and just wide enough to allow an ordinary-sized man to descend with freedom. He lit a candle and held it at arm's length down into the excavation. The sides seemed to be composed of crumbly yellow sand, but they were evidently more stable than they looked, since they held their geometrical shape so accurately. At the bottom there was a glimmer of metal twinkling irregularly from end to end. He appeared satisfied with what he saw; then snuffing the candle he turned his attention to the mound of "mullock" around him. He took up a handful and blew at it softly. It disintegrated in a fine cloud of dust and sand, but there remained on his open palm a tiny glittering particle.

"A mighty fine show," he muttered. "I reckon a glutton couldn't want no more."

The days passed. The mysterious mine was on everyone's lips. The township overflowed with eager visitors drawn from many sources; each hour saw its quota come, and the contingent from Pine Creek, a

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hundred strong, was momentarily expected. At the end of a week the country for miles around seethed like a gigantic beehive. Then only was the clue that the multitudes sought belatedly given.

It was conveyed on an "application for registration" document posted among others on the notice board outside the Warden's office, and the scrawl at the foot was the authentic signature of Bill Bradley. Bill Bradley! The crowd roared its delight, for locally Bill was as well known as the post office. No one had ever suspected him in connexion with the all-important "discovery", and, understanding his proclivities, a reason was at once advanced to account for the long delay in registration. Bill, having "struck ile", had been manfully resisting the allurements of the settlement. How was he to know that the whole countryside was in a state of uproar because of a bibulous rumour?

But, Angel Gully! That was a still more staggering surprise. Who would have thought of it?

But now that they did think of it, what a tremendous vista of possibilities was opened out. Angel Gully had been considered beyond the edge of hope, and many of the old hands lamented loudly that they had not recognized its hidden value long before this.

"Tanami Charlie said there was nothin' there," complained one.

"Ole Charlie oughter had his bumps read," proclaimed another.

But a third preferred to await developments before

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criticizing the shortcomings of the absent pioneer.

"I ain't cussin' Charlie for labelling the blanky place," he said, "but I does hope that Beery Bill ain't just been seein' things that ain't."

The various opinions of the throng were expressed tersely—and hurriedly, for each man was concerned mainly with the thought of how he was to reach Angel Gully before his neighbour. Within ten minutes the street was deserted except for a few loungers in the vicinity of the hotel, whose interest was restricted on account of the size of their thirst. But they were not devoid of enthusiasm, for they had quickly devised a simple means of sustaining excitement, and were wagering with solemn wisdom on the probable winner or winners in the mad stampede of their fellows.

Along the quiet thoroughfare a horseman rode at an easy pace. He seemed surprised at the absence of the townspeople, and drew up at the hotel to inquire the cause. The loungers aforesaid quickly enlightened him.

"You must have been asleep pretty sound not to ha' heard the racket," one of them said.

"I was bettin' on you, Slim Smith," came an alcoholic voice from within, "but now there's nothin' doing. You're scratch, and ain't got no chance."

The rider gave a short laugh of contempt.

"I buy mines. I don't want to find them. But Angel Gully? Huh! I don't like it. Still, if Bill Bradley has found something really good I may have a look at it."

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He continued his unhurried progress, idly switching the flies from his horse's ears with a light twig he carried. Happening to glance over his shoulder when clear of the township, he saw in the northward distance a great cloud of dust approaching.

"The Pine Creek bunch, at last," he chuckled. "I'll just make it in good time."

Obedying the spur, his horse broke into a hard canter.

Meanwhile Bill Bradley, his body resting on the sloping sandy bank of Angel Gully, and only the head protruding, was scanning the landscape anxiously. He had been in the same position for over an hour, and as the minutes passed he grew more and more fretful.

"He told me yesterday that the circus was sartin to be here 'bout midday," he muttered. "I ain't goin' to wait much longer for the blinkin' fools. Mebbe they won't come arter all!"

Of a sudden a huge joke thrust itself into his fancy. He considered it with relish, and a wide grin settled over his features.

"An' why shouldn't I?" he demanded of himself in righteous tones. "The mine's mine, ain't it? Smith ain't treated me fair—not as he knows of anyways—leavin' me here to perish like a blanky crow. Serve him right if I does go away—an' carry the bloomin' bonanza wi' me. Ho! Ho!——"

His amusement crackled back in his throat and interest in his vigil revived with a vengeance. He had

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dimly imagined the possibility of a dozen men, or maybe a score, arriving to peg out claims along the gully, and worry him with questions; but what he saw was a wild army approaching at the charge. There being no track to follow, the advance guard spread over a wide front. Buckboards, sulkies, bicycles, and motors swam into his view, following hard on the heels of galloping horsemen who ran a neck and neck race. Bill's range of vision was restricted. The horde already was almost upon him.

"Jumpin' kangaroos!" he exclaimed. "The whole perishin' world is comin'!"

He slithered hastily back into the bed of the creek, and ran to the tent, scarcely disappearing therein before a bunch of horsemen burst over the bank he had just vacated. They saw the half-concealed tent, and leapt from their saddles, each man with an axe gleaming in his hand. From within the calico enclosure the rhythmic thud of a pick was heard. Those who stood without tore aside the flap, crowded over the earthy heap barring their passage, and gazed with fierce eyes at the man who nonchalantly worked in the depths.

"Reef or 'luvial?" they roared.

Bill Bradley took his pipe from his mouth, and slowly replied:

"Dunno, mates; but it's all the same up or down the gory creek——"

He was alone before he had time to finish.

But not for long was he left in peace. The bulk of

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the "rush" had hit the creek about a hundred yards to the south of his camp. An uprearing boulder on the farther bank had been the attraction; it *might* have been the cap of a reef. But it wasn't; and the disappointed searchers swarmed towards the tent, which was now visible to them. They pushed and jostled their way over Bradley's cherished dump, upsetting that individual's equanimity considerably, for he was in danger of being overwhelmed by the debris which showered into his excavation.

"Keep your blanky feet off 'n my dirt," he yelled at last, in desperation. "I ain't no sign-post!"

They had no time to quarrel with him, so they fled, obeying his surly parting injunction to "mop up the perishin' creek". And they mopped it up to some purpose, rushing hither and thither, cutting posts from the scraggy timber, and driving them into the sand wherever a vacant patch offered. Yet others came, a ceaseless stream of them, and quickly a full mile of Angel Gully was marked and placarded with formal notices intimating to "those whom it might concern" that a certain area had been duly pegged by the optimistic individual whose name appeared at the bottom of the sheet.

Bill Bradley pursued his labours with steady zeal, unearthing now and then a gleaming piece of heavy metal when his changing audiences were watchful, and returning it to the depths when favourable opportunity offered. His efforts added nothing to the size of the heap on top, but none remained long

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enough to notice this strange feature. All went their way, marvelling, and the fame of Bradley's Bonanza leapt from mouth to mouth until it reached the farthest end of the line. Bill, however, was becoming perturbed. Numbers of those who had duly safeguarded their holdings according to the law's requirements had returned to the centre of attraction, and many pressing requests were being made to see the bottom of the "hole" which he had dug.

"Can't be did, mates," he said in answer to them all. "By the look o' what I'm standin' on I reckon it's too val'able to monkey wi' just because some folks are curious'r than others. It's safer wi' me standin' on it."

But they clamoured so threateningly that he allowed them one by one to peep below as he held the candle, and while full advantage was being taken of this privilege, Slim Smith elbowed his way through the throng, his lean face streaked with perspiration.

"What's this they tell me you've got, Bradley?" he asked breathlessly. "Is it a real bonanza or just an ordinary duffer. Let's have a look—" and, as the man hesitated—"I'm a buyer if the goods are right, and the figure right."

The miner extracted himself from the shaft with alacrity.

"If you're a dinkum buyer, that alters the posish. I ain't just too anxious to bust my flamin' carcass wi' hard work."

The bystanders laughed. Bill Bradley's reputation

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as a loafer was pretty widely known. Slim Smith was likely to get a soft snap—if no one else appeared willing to offer better terms.

The self-styled financier lost no time in lowering himself into the shallow working, where he peered about with the air of one who knew his business thoroughly. From the surface downwards he examined the enclosing walls, dabbing at them here and there with hawk-like action and bringing away in his fingers sundry sands that often as not contained some grains that gleamed. He nodded his head knowingly and expressed the judicial opinion that there was "no reef about it anyway". This fact, already obvious to all who could distinguish between a mine and a wheelbarrow, aroused no comment. He continued his explorations farther, evidently determined to express no encouraging criticism, though the beholders thought they saw enough to warrant the enthusiasm of the Bank of England. Meanwhile Bradley pulled at his pipe in peaceful unconcern. The investigator's survey at length was directed to the lower depths. His whole body was crouched below the surface. The eager watchers drew nearer until as many heads as could fit in clustered over the cavity. No one spoke: the "bottom" was now under observation, and here, if the find was an alluvial "wash", as most considered likely, the richest treasure should lie.

There came a muttered exclamation from the groping figure, then a peremptory call for another candle,

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which was speedily forthcoming. The extra illumination dispelled the lingering shadows, and the dozen pairs of eyes that viewed from above saw a sight the like of which they had never before witnessed. The base of the pit—that part of it which was visible over Slim Smith's shoulder—was literally studded with refulgent points and patches; and when the man turned to show the light elsewhere, the lambent hue of gold accompanied the candle in its progress.

A hushed "Ah-h-h——!" broke from the lips of the onlookers.

Slim Smith straightened himself, and held out for inspection a nugget big as a large-sized marble.

"It's a wash, all right," he said carelessly, "and promising—not too bad. I'll chance a thousand for it, Bradley!"

A thousand! By the look of things, that much appeared in sight. The crowd laughed derisively and expressed its opinion of the timid would-be purchaser in various mutterings of an uncomplimentary nature.

"Give old Beer Barrel a fair deal," someone called out.

The individual so designated glared around, looking for the speaker who had applied the opprobrious title, but failing to locate him, he contented himself with merely shaking his head at the offer made.

"Not enough, eh?" Slim Smith snapped, with every appearance of being very angry indeed. "Well, see if any of this interferin' bunch will do better."

Bradley took refuge in silence. He was not quite

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sure of what was expected of him. His mind was in a whirl, for he was just beginning to realize that Slim Smith's scheme was not so foolish after all. His sympathizers besieged him offering clamorous advice, which was all they had to give, and in the confusion his wily partner in the deal casually strolled away as if the matter concerned him no longer.

The proud pioneer of Bradley's Bonanza became disturbed, and listened only half-heartedly to the counsel of his multitudinous new friends.

"A thousand?" they echoed, contempt in their voices. "A thousand for a show like this!"

He would have given a hundred such mines for such a sum, and in his abstraction he nearly said so. One expert calculator loudly gave it as his opinion that fifty ounces would be a modest estimate of the gold already showing.

"No more'n twenty, mate," volunteered Bradley absently, with a virtuous eye to accuracy—"Least-ways," he corrected hurriedly, "I mean there ain't no more'n thirty or——"

His agitation passed unnoticed, for a fresh turmoil outside caused the tent to be emptied in a trice. It seemed to Bill Bradley that the rush had started all over again, judging by the noise being made. He was right in a sense, for the Pine Creek contingent was approaching, yet the hubbub was created by the earlier arrivals who had already annexed the Gully as their own. They were yelling out in wonder at something that they saw, and in the midst of the disturbance

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let loose, Slim Smith suddenly reappeared in the tent.

"The boobs with the coin are coming," he announced to his now rather glum confederate in a hoarse whisper. "There isn't a yard o' the creek left, and they'll all be here in a shake. There's a motor as big as a church——"

A storm of huzzahs from without drowned further conversation. The door of the tent had long since been torn to fragments, so that Bradley had a view of the creek and that part of the swaying throng directly before him.

As he looked, the heterogeneous assembly divided hurriedly. A monstrous moving shape had appeared on the opposite bank, black with the forms of men who clustered on its rounded back. For a moment it remained, balancing on the edge, then down it swooped into the sand below, and brought up at the tent, where its human freight disembarked with lightning rapidity, and scattered up and down the gully in vain search.

There remained, however, in the strange vehicle two youthful figures who seemed in no hurry to follow the others; one of them was adjusting the lever controlling the air inlet under the steering wheel, but his companion was taking a lively interest in the general surroundings and communicating his excited impressions to his absorbed associate with barely a halt for breath.

Bill Bradley eyed the apparition at his doorway with profound concern. Motors he had seen of a popular and inelegant variety that could make pro-

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testing headway even along a bush track, but never had he heard of such an awesome contrivance as this, which could deliberately roll into a gully over a high bank yet suffer no injury.

"Say, mates," he began, "what does ye call this cavortin', buckjumpin' kangarooster——?"

From the voluble one of the pair addressed, a reply shot back like the rebound of a spring.

"This, sir, is Murray's Mastodon, model A, the only caterpillar in the world capable of undertaking the gigantic task of crossing the Australian interior. You will notice that the radiator is quite cool, and that the differential is in a similar satisfactory condition, also that the auxiliary——"

But Bill Bradley was already vanquished.

"Geel!" he murmured, in deep admiration, "an' I never knew. Geel!"

Vainly endeavouring to assimilate a small portion of the information received, he retreated as he had come. When he looked down the shaft in which his treasure lay, he again ejaculated: "Geel!"

But, of course, he may have been thinking of something else by that time.

So did Murray's Mastodon arrive at Angel Gully.

But, meanwhile, what of Tanami Charlie? He had been perched on the Mastodon's back, immediately behind Stuart and Bob, all the way from the mining settlement. Others had availed themselves of the boys' hearty invitation to "jump on", but Tanami had not budged an inch from the position where he

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had been established. The sinuous roll of the Mastodon had more terrors for him than the "pig jumps" and "roots" of any bucking horse. True, the surface to which he clung was not upheaving convulsively and threatening his constant dislodgement, rather it seemed that his place of refuge was ever gliding from beneath him, employing peaceful yet persuasive efforts to bring about his downfall. He had indeed been in a continual state of surprise since he joined the crew of the caterpillar, for he had expected every instant to be gently but ignominiously deposited in the sand, and though this contingency never did occur, his wonder grew the more at safety so miraculously achieved.

If Tanami's zest for the gold chase had not suffered complete revulsion, his meeting with the boys had most assuredly caused a palliation of the disease from which he professed to suffer. The old trail had called again. The mystery surrounding his lost companion's fate had deepened. Somewhere in the unknown wastes a grim secret was held which cried to him for revelation. Then there were the diamonds! He tried to consider this aspect of the question in an enthusiastic light, yet he could only regard it impersonally. He could not bring himself to believe that unattractive little tinted stones could possibly have value equal to, or greater than that of gold. They contained no allure for him simply because he did not understand; yet at the same time he did not despise their marvellous possibilities. It was sentiment that controlled him, though he was unaware that the promptings of his

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heart in any way directed his thoughts. The bushman's code was indeed so clear in its simplicity that it was apt to appear profound to those who saw with only worldly eyes.

Having reached his decision, Tanami was no longer anxious to lead the rush! Now that he gave the matter a little unbiased thought he could see quite plainly that the prize he sought had been thrown open to too many competitors, and for the first time there came to him the glimmering of a suspicion. No honest miner would hold a secret in suspense that could so affect his mates and cause such widespread agitation and striving among far-off multitudes.

So Tanami and the boys remained by the well where they had camped for a full day, making their plans for their expedition, and considering every possible contingency that might have to be faced. Whilst they waited, the anxious train of humanity which had been behind, caught up and passed, last of all being the motorists who now plodded wearily along on foot. It was Stuart's suggestion to take these men on the Mastodon's sturdy back, so that after all, those who were hopelessly behind arrived at their journey's end abreast of the others.

Now Tanami had disappeared with them, and so the boys were left alone. Yet barely five minutes elapsed before their missing companion returned. He looked rather sheepish as he approached.

"Couldn't help havin' a look," he explained, "but there ain't nothin' in the darn creek but sand as I can

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see. Never *was* nothin' but sand and snakes in Angel Gully——”

A disappointed medley of men came surging up, having realized the impossibility of finding a corner to call their own throughout the whole length of the gully. By this time Bill Bradley's tent was again crowded to overflowing.

Stuart and Bob both thought they would like to have a look at the fabulous wealth laid bare so close at hand. A few moments earlier they might have had ample opportunity, but they had not dreamt of a mine being *within* a tent, and the crowds who could have given the information had temporarily vanished with the new-comers to sympathize with their hard luck, or gloat over their misfortune according to the spirit that moved them. Bradley's tent, however, quickly regained its popularity as a centre of attraction for all and sundry, and when it began to be whispered about that the inconsequent owner of the ground showing such fascinating riches was willing to sell his property at a reasonable figure, excitement grew more and more intense.

Meanwhile Tanami gazed languidly on the feverish scene, concealing an intense curiosity under an air of supreme indifference. Thus did he endeavour to prove to his young companions that he had reached immunity from all gilded temptations.

Inside the tent Bill Bradley stood in the shaft he had dug, but this time his purpose in being there was mainly to guard the riches under foot from being picked

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at indiscriminately by the many who wished to inspect the cavity.

"Tain't that I don't trust you, mates," he kept calling out, "but I reckon I'll stay where I is, unless—unless some o' you figure on buyin' the show."

On the outskirts of the throng many clamouring voices were raised at once, among them being Slim Smith's high-pitched tones which sounded like a snarl oft repeated.

"I've offered a thousand if ye like to take it!"

A thousand? Yes, there were several in the audience who would give more than that sum, and one shrewd individual was already noisily arranging a syndicate that could swamp any additional price quoted. At this point the tent strained from its insecure fastenings and descended upon those of the boisterous assembly who were within its shade. In a moment the calico was torn to shreds, and Angel Gully Discovery Shaft was laid bare to the heavens. Bill scrambled from his earthy refuge muttering dire threats, whereat the crowd laughed uproariously and receded a little way. Forward then jostled the would-be purchasers, mainly strangers to the district.

"Let me have a look!"

"An' me!"

"An' me!"

The miner waved to the syndicate promoter. He had heard various sums being booked by this man, and, with natural cunning, knew that out of many pockets the greatest store must come.

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"You first, Rothschild," said he, "an' hurry up, for the other galoots are waitin'."

Again was the marvellous golden sight revealed, and again a murmur of awe broke from the spectators as nugget after nugget was handed up from below, picked haphazard by one whom they all knew had never before been within hundreds of miles of the gully.

The boys from their elevated perch watched the proceedings with intense wonder, and when a sample was being handed round for inspection, a man near by, noticing their interest, gave the bit of gleaming metal to Stuart, from whom it was quickly grabbed by Bob, and as quickly again seized by someone else. In its quick passage from the boy's hands, Tanami's listless eyes caught the sheen of the specimen, and at once his attention became surprisingly alert.

The penetrating voice of Slim Smith was now heard. He had mounted the dump and was addressing the eager circle of men around the shaft in the manner of an auctioneer.

"Bradley's Bonanza is on offer," he intoned. "My figure was given at a thousand, and there it sticks——"

"Two thousand!" barked a well-known publican from the coast.

"Five hundred more!" The speaker was a prosperous storekeeper from a distant township.

The head of the hastily gathered syndicate became anxious.

"I'll double the lot!" he interjected hurriedly. "But there's a condition—I'm buyin' for a Company, an' I

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want some o' my crowd to have a look, same as me——”

“You don't trust your own judgment; you want an extra report?” Slim Smith sneered. “Well, call your man. I'm doing this job for Bill Bradley, though he's turned me down. I don't suppose he'll even give me a commission?”

“Nothin' doin’,” grunted Bill solemnly. “You horned into this push 'thout being asked.”

Slim Smith smiled crookedly and stepped down from his elevation.

But his absence was not felt. The ball had been started; it would roll along merrily without further aid.

The Syndicate became variously alarmed. Other offers were being whispered; unless the deal was closed at once the opportunity might quickly be gone. They volunteered *en masse* to inspect, and then started to wrangle among themselves for selection. Finally one of them caught sight of Tanami Charlie in the background, and at once he raised the cry:

“What about Tanami Charlie? He oughter know gold when he sees it!”

The name was caught up with enthusiasm, and a would-be wag shouted out:

“Come on, Tanami; ye once said that gold would never be found in Angel Gully, and now you'll need blinkers to keep the yellow dazzle outen your eyes.”

Tanami Charlie heard unmoved his name repeated again and again. It did not seem as if he wished to inspect Bradley's Bonanza, but the foolish taunt last

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spoken obviously ruffled his even temper. He started forward through the human lane that opened before him, and without a word to anyone descended into the shaft. His glance below must have been of the hastiest nature, for he was back on the surface almost immediately with an irregularly shaped nugget in his hand, which he proceeded to examine with minute care.

"I reckon you'll know that chunk o' metal next time you see it," Bill Bradley commented.

Tanami looked at the speaker, and smiled oddly. For a moment the miner appeared to be disconcerted by the bushman's steady gaze, then he broke out:

"It's good gold, isn't it, darn ye?"

"It ain't for me to complain about the gold, if the bank gives it an A1 ticket," Tanami said slowly, "but the boys want to know about the mine it comes from, an' you can tell 'em that better'n me——"

Slim Smith, vastly annoyed, edged his way forward.

"Quit hedgin'!" he sneered. "Can't you say the mine's all right an' be done with it?"

It was a new Tanami that answered him in a voice that was dangerously calm:

"You blisterin' little Dago! Because a beer-swilling fool goes wrong 'tain't any reason why I should save the hides o' such as you. There's not a darn one o' you deserve savin' anyway——"

"But the mine? What about the mine?" the organizer of the Syndicate cried.

"The mine? There ain't no mine!"

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"But the gold *is* there. We seed it ourselves."

Tanami Charlie looked around and saw Bill Bradley making a hurried but unobtrusive bee-line for Slim Smith's horse, which stood saddled a short way down the gully.

"Years ago, mates," he said, "I prospected this here creek and found nothin'. There ain't any more now. The gold in Bill Bradley's shaft don't belong hereabout. I reckon it's Croydon gold, an' it ain't worth more than two pounds odd an ounce——"

"What!" The shriek came from Slim Smith; and just then the absence of Bradley was noticed. In the excitement he had managed to slip away unseen by all excepting Tanami. Now he was riding as if for dear life across the plains.

There was no mistaking this time the genuine nature of Slim Smith's rage; in a lesser degree it was shared by all around for a few boisterous minutes before the humour of the situation began to make its appeal. It was he who complained most loudly, that proved beyond all doubt the truth of Tanami's surmise, for he went into the shaft himself, and scraped and dug among the residue until he had collected quite a goodly quantity of the dark yellow nuggets which had comprised Bradley's Bonanza. These he loaded into his pockets, with a scowl at those who would have protested.

"He'll get his gold when I get back my horse," he stormed. After all, his argument was reasonable, and the crowd let him have his way. There was

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certainly nothing left at the bottom of the hole to entice anyone, when he had finished. Then someone remembered that Bill Bradley had been known to possess a number of nuggets when he first arrived in the district. Like many other miners he carried his available resources around in this way. Gold in most districts of Australia has a high standard of value, yet in the quarter where Bill's treasure had been originally mined, the metal is alloyed with iron to such an extent that its worth is very much depreciated. Yet this impure gold would deceive all but the expert eye, for it has a rich lustrous sheen which enhances rather than detracts from its appearance.

The whole country had been hoaxed, and in a manner so subtle that the purpose of the hoax would have been achieved but for the flaw which Tanami had immediately noted. Still, within five minutes after the hurried departure of the man they considered the sole villain, the crowd of nearly two hundred men laughed and joked at the circumstance, and made merry at the explosive indignation of Slim Smith, who alone seemed to cherish a bitter resentment for no sufficient understandable reason.

Stuart and Bob watching the proceedings had had little idea of their gravity. It was only when they noticed Tanami's anger flame out at Slim Smith, that they wondered if their taciturn companion was really as peaceful in temperament as he looked. Bob commented upon this incident with much satisfaction.

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"He doesn't like that man, that's sure enough," he said.

"Neither do I!" returned Stuart. "He looks—treacherous, and I think he's a foreigner too."

After that their impressions became mixed. They could not understand what all the trouble was about. A hole in the ground was the subject of much contention, yet it wasn't a very big hole, and there was lots of room to make more if that one didn't please. This was Bob's reasoning. In the innocence of his heart he could not grasp the force of Tanami's cool indictment. But soon the angry shouts which arose made it apparent that the trouble was not to be so easily remedied.

"I hate gold!" Stuart burst out suddenly. "It always seems to cause rows. I wish Tanami would come back."

He had not been in his usual spirits since arriving at Angel Gully. Truth to tell, he was worrying about the Mastodon: the last twenty miles negotiated had been more difficult than anything previously experienced.

Of course, the extra load had made a difference; but when the large water-tank was filled, and extensive petrol stores taken on, the weight on the travelling tracks would be equally considerable. Then there were the foodstuffs and general equipment to consider. Further than all this, he had gathered from Tanami that the eastward course beyond Angel Gully led through a tract of country so arid and drear that even camels might founder in the wastes.

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Stuart's brain grappled with the problems that presented themselves. Tanami's unbounded faith in the "mechanical camel" and Bob's glowing enthusiasm on the same subject left many things out of account. Assuming that the sinking sand at its worst might not be impassable, it would at times doubtless slow the Mastodon's pace to a mere crawl, and the water in the radiator was bound to boil and evaporate rapidly. Already he could foresee that Tanami's bushcraft would be the vital aid of the expedition when it came to replenishing the tank.

He got out of his seat, and opened up the engine bonnet. It was fiery hot to the touch, for the sun's rays had been playing on the aluminium surface like flames. Next he examined the radiator, but his inspection here was not so satisfying; the water level was much lower than he anticipated. He frowned and replaced the cap. Bob had joined Tanami and stood among a group of miners listening eagerly to much reminiscent talk of fabulous finds in which each or other had at one time figured. His hearty voice could now and again be heard raised in interested inquiry; but gradually the topic of the Mastodon was introduced, and this gave him unstinted scope for all the eloquence at his command. His praise was not confined to the mechanism of the monster; tribute was generously given to Stuart as being the one man in the whole world to demonstrate the Mastodon's mighty capabilities.

Stuart was a modest youth whose ideas of his own

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worth fell far short of the virtues ascribed to him, but he could not fail to appreciate the whole-hearted loyalty of his chum.

"I only wish I had half the knowledge Bob says I've got," he murmured under his breath.

The crowds were now beginning to disperse, and the miscellaneous vehicles on the bank were being quickly filled with their human complement. Stuart started up the engine, and began to back the Mastodon up channel as a preparatory to making a complete turn. A roar of pained remonstrance from behind caused him to desist, and for a moment he feared he had crushed some unfortunate in the sand. He was soon undeceived. A tall gaunt personage appeared from somewhere in the rear, and leaning over towards the driver, spoke hastily and earnestly:

"I like this bonnie bit o' machinery, my lad, but I'm a conscientious objector when it threatens me wi' bodily injury. My unworthy carcass being, howsomever, removed, the course is clear o' derelicts, an' all is well."

Stuart stared at the man and thought he had never seen anyone so aggressively ugly in his life. Under a dilapidated sailor's cap there looked back at him a grim angular red visage containing two twinkling blue eyes deep set beneath shaggy red fringes, a nose that was distinctly of the snub variety, and a wide mouth scarce concealed under a scrawny red moustache. His hair was of the same prevailing hue as the rest of his features. Though apparently but

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recently shorn, it bristled out in glaring defiance below his rakish cap, traversed the temples, and merged with the kindred shade dominating the scene below.

The man apparently enjoyed Stuart's scrutiny, for his gap of a mouth prised apart in a wide smile.

"My style o' beauty is mebbe a wee bit overpowerin' at first," he suggested encouragingly, "but you'd get used to it."

Stuart laughed in spite of himself.

"I'm sorry I nearly ran over you," he said. "I didn't think there was anyone so close."

He of the crimson countenance chuckled.

"I was havin' a si-esta," he explained. "When that gloomy mate o' yours upset Angel Gully's apple-cart, I just thought I'd have a snooze for a bit, in the shade, before shapin' my course back to port."

With a friendly wave of the hand he strode off, just as Tanami and Bob appeared, followed by the passenger list for the return journey to the township. Everyone clambered aboard, and immediately afterwards the Mastodon, with cut-out open, roared its way into the yielding bank of the gully, over which it reared like a thing alive, the rim of the declivity breaking away in sections as it passed. The forward gripping tracks of the motor had reached safety and no more when the wall of the slope disintegrated. Stuart felt the Mastodon balance uneasily for a brief fraction of a second before it resumed its sinuous glide, and he mentally resolved not to tackle a

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similar angle again if it possibly could be avoided.

"Woal!" said Bob, looking back; "there's a chap running behind. D'ye think the 'bus will stand one extra?"

The belated one was the same who had had earlier conversation with Stuart. Now a look of sheer delight illuminated the rugged face.

"I watched her take it!" he cried to all in general. "She's a regular daisy!"

"Thought you had a horse, mate," said one of the men, "or does you mean that someone shook it? Thar ain't been no 'shes' in this outfit."

"My man," returned the gaunt enthusiast, "I made use o' a figure o' speech. I was referrin' to the box o' tricks on which your unworthy anatomy is restin'. As for my horse, me an' him has parted company, an' he's gone ahead to spread the glad tidings."

"Squeeze on somewhere," said Stuart, laughing again, and once more a start was made.

Bob faced around and eyed the new passenger with unconcealed interest.

"D'ye know anything 'bout Caterpillars?" he asked. "I mean—this kind of Caterpillar."

"In a' matters connected wi' engineerin', my bonnie boy, I am pro-foundly interested. I ken every type o' cat-caterpillar invented."

"But," Bob persisted, "d'ye ken—I mean do you know anything 'bout this 'bus?"

The other shook his head sadly.

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“I am only a der-derelect engineer, an’ you would bust my bubble reputation right away. I admit I dinna ken this machine; but I’m willin’ to get off an’ walk if it isn’t a Murray——”

Bob almost choked. He had been preparing an eloquent discourse on his pet subject, and the flood-gates had all but opened. He sat back in his seat with a sigh and thought it over.

CHAPTER V

Into the Unknown

In the excitement of the "Rush" the real mission of the Mastodon aroused no inquiry. It seemed to be accepted that the desert tractor's appearance on the scene was the enterprising move of some outside capitalists who had secured Tanami's services for prospecting on a wide scale. Now that the Angel Gully bubble was burst and public enthusiasm had experienced a cold douche, a more normal feeling began to prevail among the people. Curiosity in the Mastodon was kindled by the tales that were told of its marvellous powers, and by the time the return journey was accomplished the miners had come to the conclusion that the mechanical camel had proved itself to be the most wonderful contrivance that could have been imagined.

Stories were repeated of its flying dash from Port Darwin, and how it had thrust over creeks and sand patches as if such obstacles had not existed. True, it *had* slowed up in the more difficult country near Angel Gully, but then it had carried an extra heavy load, and was obviously not trying to outdistance other traffic at this stage.

Bill Bradley had disappeared completely. It was

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reported that someone had seen him on the northward trail, well ahead of anyone else. For once he had evaded the allurements of the township, but fear rather than the beginning of a moral regeneration was doubtless the reason for this unprecedented behaviour. He still rode Slim Smith's horse, which all agreed was a sign of insanity, for theft of this nature was a criminal offence, whereas his "Bonanza" at Angel Gully was just an indication of perverted humour which the law did not take into account. Yet, even in this, his reasoning appeared to be sound, for Slim Smith, despite his fury, would lodge no formal complaint. He rather seemed anxious to prevent others from interfering in his interest, and so he acquired a status among his fellows he had never before known, for he being most concerned had forgiven, his hard words were but the outward showing, his heart must be soft within!

When this suggestion was made to him, however, he stormed so bitterly that it was at once withdrawn, and his sympathizers thereafter left him severely alone.

The exodus of disappointed gold-seekers began without delay. Some started on their return journey on the same evening of their disillusionment, and the main army set out on the following day. A few stragglers remained behind to swell the population of the little town, but the quiet of the landscape on the second day was in extreme contrast with the beaver-like industry which had possessed it previously.

Tanami and the boys had erected their tent on the eastern outskirts of the camp, and the Mastodon crouched under the shade of a canvas covering hastily set up on poles adjacent to them. Here Stuart and Bob worked hard overhauling and oiling the complex machinery, and that job accomplished, they set about filling up with water ballast. This was a tedious occupation, for the water had to be raised by windlass from a deep well some hundred yards away, and though the car was brought almost close against the supply, the raising and lowering of the bucket so many times was no mean task in the broiling sun. Tanami, however, insisted on lending a hand during these operations. His proffered assistance during the lubrication proceedings had not been accepted for the simple reason that the bushman's knowledge of machinery was of the haziest description, and he had no idea where to apply the force pump. Now, however, he was in his element, and bucket after bucket was wound up and splashed into the tank which fitted within the back portion of the Mastodon's framework. The tank was designed to hold fifty gallons, though up till this time the space had been used for general impedimenta and sundry stores. A similar amount of room was available on the opposite side of the chassis for petrol supplies, and farther back in the curving shell of the bodywork was a moderate-sized locker which could be utilized for carrying necessary supplies.

Tanami was keenly interested in these internal arrangements. His pondering eyes seemed to sum up

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needs and possibilities at a glance. In vain Bob pleaded for the water supply to be curtailed.

"Fifty gallons are nearly a quarter of a ton," he complained, "and surely we can't drink all that before coming to a well."

The bushman shook his head in disapproval.

"A camel can go nine days without a drink," he mused aloud, "and then it can take in thirty gallons afore it feels comfortable. Supposin' anything happens to the—the works, Bob, an' we don't reach water reg'lar——"

"I agree with you," Stuart broke in hurriedly. "You know best what should be done."

Bob's opposition collapsed at once.

"I'm not buttin' against 'safety first'," he explained. "I was just thinkin' that the Sahara fellow hadn't to carry 'bout a ton o' dead weight like us."

"This ain't no Sahara, Bob," returned Tanami with some grimness. "There ain't no track to foller, and there ain't no palm trees settin' aside water-holes, which a man could see miles away, and the natives ain't waitin' to welcome us unless wi' spears and boomerangs."

"Gosh!" Bob muttered in high glee, "that'll look better than ever when it's all printed at the finish. But look! Here's our funny friend comin'. I thought he'd left with the rest, an'—an' I wanted to ask him how he recognized our 'bus; seein' that this is the first of the kind."

Tanami at the windlass gave closer attention to his

work. He disliked being interrogated regarding the plans of the party, which he had so far resolutely refused to disclose to anyone. Stuart turned and greeted the visitor with a smile. He was such an extraordinary looking personage. His faded and greasy uniform cap still perched on the back of his head, giving little or no protection from the sun, but he had discarded the flimsy drill coat he had previously worn, and now appeared in an open-fronted shirt, with sleeves rolled back above the elbows. His walk was almost jaunty, and his long arms swung at his side like pendulums.

He nodded cheerfully to Stuart, and strode over to the windlass.

"When there's a job o' work to be done," he said, "I just hate to look on."

He grabbed the second handle of the windlass barrel and spun it round with playful energy, so that Tanami at the other end looked up with a start. But though the bushman at first resented the new-comer's presence he could not fail to appreciate the services so voluntarily rendered. His quiet gaze, unknown to the other, studied him from head to foot, noticed the sinewy neck and great depth of chest, and took mental stock of the powerful forearms displayed. For all his apparent slimness, the red-headed man would be a force to reckon with in a tight corner. Tanami had come to this conclusion when he absently asked:

"Any good in a scrimmage, mate?"

He of the fiery poll laughed loudly.

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"Man, I've had a lot of practice. My life's been a succession o' battles an' fechts, an' though I say it mysel', I havena met the man yet who can afford to be unceevil to Jock M'Crimmon."

He sighed prodigiously, then remarked further: "An' I'm a man o' peace, mind you, an' I aye keep repeatin' that bonnie bit o' poetry I learned at school—'He that fights and runs away, will live to fight another day'. But the beggars don't always run—you see my outward showin' is a delusion an' a snare, an' that wi' my bonnie auburn complexion encourages the misguided deevils——"

"Hoorah!" shouted Bob, delightedly rushing forward with out-stretched hand, "red or no red, you're a daisy, Jock M'Crimmon. I don't blame you for fightin'—not a bit!"

Jock seized the proffered hand in his own ungainly paw, and surveyed the youth critically, while an expansive smile gradually spread over his features.

"Yours is a natural blush, my laddie," he said. "It's the sign o' a modest and retirin' tem-temperament, which will wear off wi' years and confidence; but my halo has been earned in the Arctic, where the frost burns like fire. Of course my hair was this delicate shade o'—o' auburn at the start, but my skin was as the driven snaw until the polar blasts roasted it."

Stuart now became interested.

"Aren't you just jokin'?" he said. "I thought only the sun could burn."

"Jokin'? Me! I never joke. Whaur d'ye think the

Red Indians get their colour? or the Esquimaux? or the Patagonians? Frost and heat have the same outward effect, my lad. But to illustrate my point, let me tell you o' twa o' my experiences—one in Greenland, and the other on the Niger——”

“Hold hard, mate,” interrupted Tanami. “The blisterin’ tank is filled, an’ it might freeze if you unhitched the Arctic yarn careless-like. I reckon you’d better choke it back until we get over to the tent, and then we’ll all take a whiff o’ the icy breeze.”

Jock M’Crimmon accepted the invitation promptly, though Stuart had a shrewd idea that he was more interested in the Mastodon than in his own proposed narratives of strange adventure. In this the boy was right, for when the motor had returned to its shelter, the lanky engineer calmly forgot the avowed purport of his visit, and entered into a deep discussion with Stuart concerning high-speed engines generally, cleverly narrowing the subject down until it touched only on the bore and stroke of the Mastodon’s cylinders, with an occasional diversion to tensile strains and so forth. Finally Stuart opened up the bonnet of the car for his inspection, and started the engine; and this was where the visitor’s enthusiasm reached a climax.

“It’s a bonnie box o’ machinery,” he commented. “Beats anything o’ the kind I have ever seen.”

“I know there’s nothing to touch it,” Stuart admitted with quiet pride, “and the patent gearing’s—great!”

Jock stood back a little and surveyed the Mastodon as a whole.

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"I've seen countries," he said, "where it would be a godsend, oot in the Gobi Desert, for instance——"

"Thought you kind o' said you was a sailor sort o' engineer," broke in Tanami. "Thar ain't no deserts at sea, I reckon."

Jock beamed as if sudden inspiration had just burst upon him.

"The spirit moves me," he began, "to elucidate the story o' my wild an' verra woolly career. Gather round, laddies; I wad a tale unfold, the record o' a blameless life."

"Umph!" said Tanami.

"Umph yersel'!" retorted Jock, smiling blandly, and straightway he entered upon his thrilling narrative.

It appeared that he had started his wanderings as junior engineer of an Arctic exploring vessel, and afterwards had shipped on all sorts of strange craft in his anxiety to see the world. Often, too, he had adventured ashore in far-off lands, and had so acquired a wonderful store of experience that tripped off his tongue without any recollective effort. The boys were duly impressed with the dramatic recital, for Jock M'Crimmon's gift of oratory was of no mean order.

"So here I stand," he concluded, "a monument to the virtues o' perseverance an'—an' enterprise. I've an extra chief's ticket laid by somewhere in my extensive wardrobe, and I've got twenty-seven and sixpence in my pocket. I expected to make a fortune, in a quiet easy way, for I thought that gold sprouted up here like carrots, by what I heard folks say. But as usual

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I bang up against adventure, right into the middle o't, for I can see that you're goin' to welcome me like a lost bairn." His voice sank to an enticing whisper. "Don't you think I could be of some use in the outfit?"

His gaze rested on each of the three in turn.

Stuart looked his surprise, for words were beyond him at the moment.

Bob chuckled hugely, thinking it was all a joke; but in the most unlikely quarter the adventure-seeker thought he saw a sign of encouragement. The bushman broke the silence:

"You don't know what you're askin', mate," he said grimly. "We ain't a prospectin' expedition as most folks think——"

"I heard this verra day that you were goin' out after a lost explorer," said M'Crimmon.

"My fault!" muttered Bob, in disgust with himself. "I happened to mention it to someone at the post office this morning. I didn't think it mattered."

"No more it does, Bob," agreed Tanami, though a shade of doubt rested on his face nevertheless. "If any bloomin' fool wants to follow, he'll have a hard time, I reckon, for the crows will eat what the blacks miss."

The persistent Scot was not perturbed.

"I'm waitin' like the wandered sheep that wanted into the fold," he announced calmly. "There's mebbe a wee tinge o' black in my fur, but otherwise I'm no a bad sort o' sheep——"

Stuart shook his head reluctantly.

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"I believe we would all like you well enough," he said, "but we really haven't got any money——"

"Money?" came the indignant retort, "wha asked for money? Filthy lucre and romance don't often go together. You couldna buy wi' money, laddie, what I'm offerin' for nothin'—the services o' a strong arm, an' the heart o' a M'Crimmon!"

His indignation was so extreme that all hastened to pacify him; the red-headed man had a temper as fiery as his hair. To the surprise of the boys, Tanami showed the greatest interest. It almost seemed as if he were pleased about something, for his eyes gleamed with an unusual light.

"I reckon I know a man when I see him, mate," he said. "You ain't exactly an oil paintin', an' the blacks might be scared a bit by the look o' your phiz, but that ain't here nor there. This expedition ain't goin' to be any picnic, an' my young mates will have men's work to do all the time. I ain't frightened o' them, but there's always a chance o' a blisterin' spear lobbin' along, an'—an' well, I think we'd be safer wi' a standby for emergencies."

This was a long speech for Tanami to make, and it dealt with an aspect of things he seldom spoke about in so serious a tone. Even now Bob thought he was deliberately trying to frighten off the gaunt engineer. Stuart knew different. Over and over again he had fancied that the bushman carried some weight on his mind of which he feared to speak. Now he gave a glimmering of it—just a glimmering, and no more.

Jock M'Crimmon was evidently not dismayed by the prospect set before him.

"Stand by, is the engineer's motto," he cried cheerily, "and when danger sticks her red nose round the corner you may aye depend on Jock M'Crimmon standin' by!"

He insisted on shaking hands all round, and after a while went off in boisterous good humour to fetch his gear from the hotel.

When he had gone, Bob gave way to uncontrollable mirth.

"He's just like a caricature lifted clean out of a story book," he exclaimed. "I never thought that such men really existed."

Tanami nodded thoughtfully, not quite understanding.

"I reckon there's some mighty strange folk in the world, Bob, but it's a very funny thing that every blinkin' sinner thinks that it's the other fellow that's funny."

Stuart laughed, but Bob could see no trace of a smile on Tanami's inscrutable countenance.

It had been arranged that the expedition should start immediately all necessary supplies were secured, and already everything was to hand except a dozen gallons of petrol which were required to complete the quota of fuel decided upon. Enough was being carried, according to Stuart's estimate, to last the Mastodon for nearly a thousand miles—under normal conditions; so surely, he reasoned, even in face of great disad-

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vantages it would suffice for at least half that distance. In his own province he calculated against the unknown factor, leaving much to spare, and Tanami, noticing this, wished that the water supply could be adjusted in the same fashion. So much depended on the daily progress made, and this no one could possibly foretell.

When M'Crimmon returned he found all three grouped about a map which was spread on the ground, and Stuart was pointing out to the bushman the line of travel to be taken.

"'Tain't no good tellin' me latitoods an' longitoods, Stuart," said Tanami, looking dazed. "If you're able to tell me where we are when I ask, I'll get the direction all right."

Jock looked at the trio in unconcealed delight.

"A chart!" he muttered in a deep husky voice intended for a whisper. He peered over their shoulders and commented further: "A chart—wi' a wee cross marked—an' mysterious talk o' latitudes! Oh ho, my bonnie boys, I see ro-mance by the bucketfu' in this!" He squatted beside them with a grunt of content.

"Romance?" echoed Tanami. "Never noticed any o' it hangin' around on my travels, but I reckon Stuart will give you the hang o' the whole story; it's plumb full o' mystery an' treachery—an' mebbe worse."

The engineer listened with rapt attention while the cause and purpose of the expedition were being explained, and at the end he was as much affected by the simple recital as the boy himself.

"I think you're a verra brave laddie," he said in a

subdued voice and rising to his feet. "Yes, a verra brave laddie," he repeated, "an'"— he glanced across at Tanani—"I've got a suspicion that you're in good company, barrin' mysel', of course——"

"Barrin' nothin'," the bushman said promptly. "We stand hitched fast together on this job; I ain't no hero, mate, so don't make any mistake 'bout me."

Jock was rapidly regaining his good spirits. He had been thinking rapidly and had already come to a brilliant conclusion.

"Cheer up, my lad!" he cried, slapping Stuart heartily on the shoulder. "Never say die. Your dad may be still alive, for a' we ken. Diamonds have aye been mysterious things, an' many a good man has been tugged into nets o' treachery when a temptin' fortune has to be shared. This Dago-man, that Tanami speaks aboot, may be holdin' him prisoner, an' in that case we'll upset his little apple-cart sort o' sudden-like."

"You mean well, old man," Tanami conceded, with a grim smile, "but diamonds ain't good digestive food, an' I saw nothin' that would feed even a hungry muskittie in them parts; but if there's anything in the story o' other diamonds havin' come from the same place, then that fetches along all the mystery ye're cryin' for."

They left it at that, and continued their preparations for a departure in the early morning. Before evening came they had many visitors, for Bob's enthusiastic loquacity was bearing fruit; his whisper of the morning had spread around like wildfire, and it seemed as if the

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whole populace were aroused. They came in ones and twos and batches, eagerly questioning. Few remembered Jim Notley's expedition which had so unobtrusively started out from their midst, but all had heard of his ill-fated attempt to penetrate the country from the other side of the continent. As for Tanami, they knew that he had made several wild journeys into the far interior, but they had not realized his compelling motive. To them he was just an old timer "with a rat" for looking for things that did not exist, and they could not associate the pensive-eyed bushman with the daring journeys that the Press had ascribed to him.

Tanami listened to their well-meaning counsel patiently, but with little comment. He was well aware that of the number who called many would suspect his purpose, and others would be openly convinced that he was on the trail of some previously prospected treasure.

"We're goin' to look for dead men's bones," he explained to them all, "and mebbe we'll leave our own alongside o' them."

They left him alone then, and turned their attention to the other members of the party; Stuart's presence they could partly understand, and for the time they ceased doubting Tanami's explanations, and gave the boy a whole-hearted cheer. He appealed to their sense of manhood.

"I don't like keeping anything back from them," said Stuart, when the crowd departed. "It seems mean not to tell them about the diamonds."

"I reckon it would be sure death for many o' them

if ye did, lad," replied Tanami. "As it is, we're like enough to be followed by some tricky fools who don't know when they're comfortable. Anyways, I ain't heard a whisper 'bout diamonds, so if the blisterin' Dago escaped, he's kept mighty quiet. I'm beginning to think he must be a goner after all."

By this time the Mastodon was packed in every conceivable corner. The personal belongings of the party had been cut down to an irreducible minimum, and only the utmost necessities in the way of stores were being carried, yet the bulk to be loaded had grown and grown, until not a vacant place appeared even on the running-boards.

Bob's place by the driver was already in jeopardy, and he could see that his perch would be higher than usual, if he had to sit on top of the cases which even now nearly filled the seat. Where the other two members of the party were to balance was a hard proposition to determine. Rifles, picks, and shovels which could not be packed elsewhere were lashed on either side of the bonnet.

"I was afraid they were comin' my way," confided Bob to Stuart, with a sigh of relief. "I don't mind sittin' on a fairly flat surface, but my anatomy would object to the edge of a shovel."

"Here's a bonnie box that should meet a' your requirements, then," announced M'Crimmon. "Tanami says it has to be kept cool, so don't hatch it."

"Heave it on," cried the youth; "it'll help me a bit farther up in the world."

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"I reckon it might," agreed Tanami, "but we need the stuff for other purposes, so don't be too flamin' ambitious."

He turned the case over on the seat with tender care until it rested to his satisfaction.

Bob, curious to know what breakables it contained, went near to look for a label that might disclose the secret. He found it, not a label, but a red stencilled warning: "Gelignite—Handle with care."

"Gosh!" he muttered, wiping the beading perspiration from his brow. "I'm beginning to think I should give up my seat to Jock. I'd just hate to be selfish."

It was late before the crew of the Mastodon sought slumber. Everything had been stowed away in the car, leaving only the bare ground to sleep upon and no covering at all save the common canopy of the tent. The boys had rather a dread of the various crawling things they had seen during the last few days, and did not relish the idea of lying in over-close contact with any wandering snakes, scorpions, or centipedes that might happen along; besides, they had letters to write which must be posted that night, for there would be little time to attend to these in the morning, especially as Tanami insisted on getting a start at daybreak before any outsiders were likely to be about. This secretive trait of the bushman had become almost an obsession lately, so the boys thought. In looking for possible spies, he had foolishly doubted the good will of all around. Bob especially rather regretted that an ad-



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THE MASTODON IS SAVED

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miring throng would not be present to see them off the premises. He considered that the Mastodon was not getting the publicity it deserved! He decided to suggest this to Tanami before a start was actually made.

However, both soon became so engrossed in their writing that all else was quickly forgotten, and while their pencils flew over the pages so awkwardly balanced on their knees, Tanami and M'Crimmon talked together with voices lowered, and in perfect understanding. These two opposite types had found a bond of fellowship and were well satisfied.

Bob looked up from his work and addressed his chum with much earnestness.

"Say, old sport, if you're writing to—the kid, at all, you won't forget to mention that I've thinned off a bit, and that I look just A1 in my helmet?"

"I've done more than that," Stuart replied. "I've said—I've said—oh, never mind what I've said, but there's a bit about dynamite in it——"

"Oh, is there?" grumbled Bob. "Well, so long as you don't say I have to sit on the blessed stuff I'm not kickin'."

Their letters written and posted, they listened for a while to a stirring narrative which M'Crimmon was relating with much gusto to Tanami, who was to all appearance fast asleep in the shadows. He had come to a particularly thrilling part: "An' the bear made a lumberin' rush at me. His fangs glistened like spikes o' the ice we were standing on, an' his

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tr-remendous claws stretched oot to grab me. I hadna anything but my wee knife, an' he seemed to ken this, for the enor-rmous brute laughed—aye, actually laughed—as I stood there——”

“ Why didn't you run away?” asked Bob breathlessly.

“ Ice floe, my lad. You havena been listenin'——” He hastened to catch up the thread of his tale. “ As I stood there—aye, as I stood there I saw him gie a deliberate wink, an' then I felt his big hairy paw grip me around the neck——”

A violent snore from Tanami interrupted him, and he stopped with his mouth still open and gaped at his slumbering audience with a sorrowful countenance.

“ And what happened?” inquired Bob, deeply concerned.

“ This is where ye get the cheerfu' news 'To be continued in our next', my lad. I can hear that it's time to seek the arms o' Murphy, as they say in the classics——” He broke off in unmusical song: “ On the cauld cauld ground I laid me, I laid me doon wi' a sigh; but the muskitties cried like a trumpet blast: ‘Yo ho, we'll a' stand by.’”

Bob, by dint of shifting his body around in the loose sand, soon contrived to create a resting-place that fitted more or less approximately to the contour of his frame, and soon, in spite of his qualms about creeping things, he fell fast asleep. Stuart endeavoured to follow his example but failed miserably. He was tired, but he tossed around restlessly, his brain sim-

mering with conflicting thoughts and emotions. He dozed after a while, and to his subconscious mind there came a vision. A small boy whose face somehow seemed familiar was standing in a little room the floor of which was strewn with books, among them being a large atlas which lay wide open at his feet. Near him, and regarding the boy intently, stood a tall bronzed man who smiled as he put the question: "And how will you come for me; with an atlas and a pencil?"

Stuart awoke with the boy's answer trembling on his lips, and behold memory came to him and he recognized it as his own. "With a gun an' a sextant! With a gun an' a sextant!"

And so the boyish promise had come true. Pride surged into Stuart's heart, and he recalled the actual scene of his dream as if it had but recently taken place. "I'm coming, Dad," he whispered, "I'm coming as I said—I'm coming——"

He drowsed off again, but this time his period of unconsciousness was even briefer than before. Vaguely he heard a metallic clang, subdued yet penetrating to ears that knew the sound so well. He was awake before the slight echo had died away. Someone had moved the swinging bonnet of the Mastodon!

Even as the thought came to him he dismissed it as absurd. Who could possibly have designs against the Expedition? Probably a native cat or dingo had been smelling round. He continued to listen intently. In the near distance a dingo began to wail dismally, and at once its call was answered by other denizens

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of the night, so that for a short space Bedlam reigned. He had become accustomed to this sort of distraction, though it always created in him a sense of eeriness which he found it hard to shake off. There was no moon, but in the dim starlight which filtered through the calico roof he could just make out that his companions had not moved from their positions. They were all peacefully asleep notwithstanding the discomfort of their sandy couch. The boy's vigilance relaxed, and he tried once more to compose his rushing ideas into forgetfulness, but suddenly he became alert again. The sound had been repeated; it was as if someone had pressed against the steel covering of the Mastodon's engine. Almost simultaneously he heard the soft scratch of a safety match, and a tiny dab of illumination flickered for an instant through the tenuous tent wall.

He did not hesitate now. He was on his feet, and outside before he had time to wonder what was happening. In the semi-gloom where the motor lay, he could distinguish movement, a form darker than the shadows was stealthily edging away into the bush. Without a pause the boy sprang after the intruder. "Bob!—Tanami!" he cried as he ran.

A hissing spluttering sound now issued from the region of the motor's engine, and an acrid odour assailed the boy as he shouted.

He was answered almost immediately by a loud "Yo ho!" from M'Crimmon and an inarticulate roar from Tanami.

The skulking figure half turned at the alarm, then, straightening itself, bolted precipitately. He had little chance of escape in this way. Anxiety lent wings to Stuart's headlong dash. Always fleet of foot, he was now possessed of a raging fury that drove him on like a whirlwind.

The fugitive, snarling like a wild animal, swung round.

"Keep back, you fool!" he gritted.

But Stuart, heedless of the warning, bore down upon him; his lithe body literally hurled itself against the man, who crouched like a dog awaiting the onslaught. The boy's whole strength was in his rush; he meant to hold the unknown enemy at all costs until help arrived. They rolled over together, the man desperately slashing at the boy with something he held in his hand; and one of his fierce lunges found its mark. Stuart felt a sharp pain in his arm, and wondered vaguely what it meant until he found his grasp slipping weakly; then he understood.

It had all happened in less than sixty seconds, as was proved soon afterwards. With a curse the man jerked clear of the boy's failing hold, and darted off into the night, eluding by little more than a yard the vengeful approach of Tanami and M'Crimmon.

"Hurt, lad?" breathed the bushman, bending over the boy anxiously, and leaving his companion to continue the chase. Stuart struggled to his feet, scarce hearing.

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"The engine!" he gasped. "He's done something to the engine!"

Without another word they both rushed back to the Mastodon, whence came a whispering note that intermittently crackled like a leaping flame.

"Good Lord!" groaned Tanami. "The swine has fired it. Stand back, lad!"

Stuart in despair was groping over the cylinder heads, not knowing what he sought. In a corner of the casing he saw something glow.

"Back!" roared the bushman's voice in his ear, and Tanami's sinewy hand snatched at the creeping flame. It came away in his grasp, carrying with it a small rectangular package. He swung the deadly trophy from him and it exploded in the air with a thunderous report.

Stuart leaned weakly against the frame of the Mastodon. His shirt sleeve was dripping with his own blood. He knew that; but a great content filled his heart, and he gave no thought to the wound received.

"Two plugs!" he heard in muttered soliloquy beside him. "Two plugs o' gelignite an' a sixty-second fuse to give him time to get clear. I'd a given my shirt to have a look at his face."

Then two powerful arms supported Stuart and for a time he knew no more.

M'Crimmon came back unsuccessful and breathing slaughter. He had had no chance of overtaking the man in the gloom, where every dwarfed shrub loomed out as the possible quarry.

"I thought the happy home had been torpedoed," he said; "an' I heard the deevil I was chasin' laughin' like to split, though I couldna see him."

Bob, who had been awakened only by the explosion, was mournfully regretful that he had missed "all the fun", but his concern for Stuart kept him quiet for a time until he was quite sure that his chum was not seriously injured. The wound in the boy's arm was a long ripping cut from shoulder to elbow, not deep enough to injure the muscles, but sufficient to cause much weakness through loss of blood. His shirt had been torn to tatters in the brief struggle, and ominous slashes in it here and there showed that his night antagonist had intended doing him more deadly hurt than was received.

It was clear to all that some unknown enemy had tried to block the expedition from setting out. The dynamite used would have shattered the engine and probably exploded the petrol store, so that complete destruction would have resulted. Who could have schemed to bring about such disaster?

Tanami did not say much, but what he said was to the point. There was no doubt in his mind that the man behind it all was the same who had taken his place in Jim Notley's fateful journey. He had all along held the strong belief that this mysterious usurper had not perished with his chief. Now he expressed himself as being absolutely convinced of this.

"His name was Jenner or Jennet," he muttered savagely, "and them who saw him told me that he

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was a furrin'-lookin' rat wi' a black p'inted beard. 'Thar ain't no man o' the name in this camp, an' I shouldn't expect it nuther, for it would be an unhealthy label to carry around among Ostralyans who might remember; and like enough he's heaved his sizzling whiskers on the scrap heap too, so we dunno who we're up against."

"I would know the man who gave me this if I saw him again," Stuart said, patting his bandaged arm. "He tried to hide his face even though it was pretty dark, but when I was close up at him I knew I had seen him somewhere before, at least I'm almost sure."

Tanami abused himself roundly.

"I oughter have mounted guard, same as I'd do among the blacks when they behave nasty. I reckon I oughter be tomahawked for my darn carelessness in allowin' any o' the gory sinners to nose within coo-ee o' this camp."

Bob said nothing. He was in the throes of abandoning a resolution he had made. After all, he had decided not to speak to Tanami on the subject of giving the Mastodon a wider publicity at this stage.

There was no thought of further sleep now; anyhow, the night was far advanced, already Sirius had his light in the eastern sky heralding the dawn. The sun had scarcely cleared the horizon before each one was at his post. Bob swung the starting handle, to save the battery current, for the dynamo had not been charging much lately. The eight cylinders of the Mastodon tuned up from a sibilant murmur to a

reverberating roar which appeared to awaken everyone within a mile, for each habitation immediately showed signs of life, and great activity was displayed by the inmates to get into closer touch with the pulsating monster that was making unexpected departure into the wilds.

"Don't see any pole-cat wi' a bomb, sprintin' along, does you, Bob?" Tanami asked, settling himself gingerly among the paraphernalia strapped over his accustomed place at the back of the motor.

Bob from his elevation on the dynamite case made diligent survey but failed to locate anything alarming.

"I'm quite sure he's not there," he reported. "And now we're goin' to have a merry little send-off after all."

Stuart was all ready to slip in the starting-gear, but he delayed, thinking that Tanami might wish an opportunity to report the night's occurrence. The bushman, however, had no such intention. He shouted out some instructions to an acquaintance which had to do only with the well-being of his horse. He had gone into this matter at great length before, but it still seemed to be all that was concerning him now.

"An' Pat," he added, as an afterthought, in a voice loud enough to be heard by all, "if ye run across the ring-barked son o' a gun that tried to blow us up last night, tell him from me that I've a bigger score even than that to settle wi' him. He'll understand——"

He said no more; the yell of horror and amazement that broke from the crowd showed that all had listened.

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The Mastodon with open exhaust bellowed mightily a last good-bye, then, at a touch from Stuart, developed convulsive action. The great caterpillar tracks spun around for a few seconds like the wheels of a locomotive on wet rails, then suddenly they gripped, and the mechanical marvel lunged forward. A chorus of coo-ees arose from all sides. Bob waved his helmet, and would have drawn attention to the fact that the engine was pulling with ease a load that would have paralysed any other contrivance of the kind in the world, but no one would have heard, so he reluctantly saved his breath.

Stuart laughed aloud in the sheer joy of definite movement at last towards the goal of his dreams. Tanami, just a little nervous about the security of his balance, puffed hard at his pipe and paid no attention whatever to outside circumstances. He was rather envying the luxurious ease in which M'Crimmon lolled about on a base as unstable as his own. The latter individual was by no means unmindful of the applause received, indeed it seemed to affect him deeply, for he burst into mournful song, proclaiming that there was "no place like ho-o-me" until Bob persuaded him to desist by threatening to upset the dynamite box on top of him. So they headed out towards the land of diamonds, savages, and mystery, and the first rays of a radiant sun shone in their faces and enveloped the expedition in a golden glory.

CHAPTER VI

A Welcome Discovery

According to the chart which Stuart had carefully prepared, an east-north-east course would lead to the point where the latitude and longitude given would intersect. Tanami's information showed that Jim Notley and he had struck Diamond Creek at a place where it bore approximately north and south, since they approached it almost at right angles while travelling eastward; of course the channel might swing in any direction at other places, for its origin and destination were alike unknown. This uncertain feature, the bushman thought, was probably the reason for his failure to recognize the creek on his two later journeys. Being simply a fissure in a sandy waste similar to scores of others, it might easily be rediscovered yet not identified. There had been a low range of jagged hills in the vicinity on the original journey, and this he saw again, but it was while he was endeavouring to pick up his bearings from this landmark that the blacks appeared on both occasions.

Stuart spread out his map on the ground when breakfast was being prepared at Angel Gully. The Mastodon had accomplished twenty miles in two

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hours despite the sinking sands in its passage and the heavy load it carried. It was odd to notice the confused array of miners' "pegs", still bearing their grimy placarding which told a dreary tale of hopes unfulfilled. The scene of Bradley's Bonanza bore eloquent testimony to the excitement that had reigned here but a few days back. The channel was trampled into comparative hardness, as if an army had passed through. The imprint of eager feet would remain until the "willy-willys" blew, and the desert reclaimed its own. Its brief hour of fantastic fame had come and gone, and Angel Gully had retired into the solitudes for another æon of repose.

Tanami, after a glance at the map, turned away bewildered, and when Stuart, with the prismatic compass, pointed out the direction of the distant goal, he was no less confused. He was accustomed to choose his route with an eye to the possibilities of the country, correcting finally any error of leeway by an infallible instinct which he could no more explain than the mysteries of the stars in the heavens.

"It's like this, Stuart," he said. "The lie o' the land keeps changing. A sand belt may run out to sunrise, and again it might be headin' the other way, or any old way. I guess there ain't no sense trackin' across every bad bit o' country that comes along, when it could be avoided by slewing sort of sideways. You see, a man gets thirsty, an' so does a camel—now and again, and the main job is always to look for water without worryin' 'bout goin' straight."

It was all simple enough to the bushman, but to the boy, whose calculations were desperately worked out with mathematics, Tanami's method presented a maze of difficulties. Yet the logical sense of it was already apparent. Here where they halted, a shimmering expanse stretched ahead until it merged into the horizon, broken only by rolling dunes that showed no signs of vegetation, unless where a little to the south these undulations were sparsely capped with spiky herbage. Where anything could find root it was obvious that the soil would be firmer than elsewhere. With a sigh Stuart drew a short diverging line on his chart, altering the course by fifteen degrees. He did not like the look of things in the almost immediate foreground. The gully seemed to be the line of demarcation between a coarse heavy sand and sand of a finer quality. The latter had now to be faced. Everything would depend on the Mastodon's behaviour in this altered element.

M'Crimmon and Bob refused to see anything to worry about, at least so they proclaimed, and in the latter case enthusiastic faith easily triumphed over disloyal doubt, leaving not a shred for argument. The engineer, however, behind his mask of placid good humour, concealed a perplexing thought which he would not speak—lest he should unnecessarily discourage the party. It had to do with radiation and evaporation. He was satisfied about all else.

They left Angel Gully at nine o'clock, and this time the Mastodon did not take the bank at a specta-

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cular rush with everyone on board. Stuart was taking no more risks of that nature; the springs had to be considered. So he negotiated the slope alone, and at the easiest point he could find, while his companions trudged after, catching him up when he stopped the engine on top, well away from the edge. They clambered to their places with sundry expressions of satisfaction. Even so short a walk through the sinking sand was trying after the comfort that had been theirs. Though it was early, the sun was well started on its daily round, and the sand was already hot to the tread. Tanami had now changed seats with Bob, so as to be nearer to the driver, whom he began to direct in monosyllables soon after the motor got under way.

"Right! Steady! Left! Steady!"

The sun soon appeared a little way to the left, casting a distorted shadow to the rear of the Mastodon, which Stuart could just see out of the tail of his eye.

Then Tanami was evidently content.

"Keep her at that for half an hour, Stuart," he said. "Watch for the shadow; you'll find it easier than botherin' 'bout any foolin' compass."

"But the sun won't stay in the same place," Stuart reasoned, trying to grasp the bushman's purpose.

"No more it will, lad, but every half-hour or so you'll have to swing to the right, bringing the shadow closer up all the time; an' then just after midday I reckon we'll chase the blinkin' thing until sundown. That's the only way to travel in the bush. There ain't any compass that can touch the old sun when you

git to know his track in the sky. Now we'll make for a soak that your dad an' me found; I calc'late it should be 'bout forty miles from here, an' by the time we git there we should know how the jigger's goin' to carry on."

The first hour passed without event, but the pace of the Mastodon had become slower and slower, and at the end of the period the speedometer showed only eight miles traversed from the gully. By noon the rate of progress had still further dwindled. The Mastodon, in M'Crimmon's words, was making 'bad weather' of it; sometimes she would lie as in the trough of a sandy sea, and labour just as a storm-beaten ship might do, her revolving tracks whirling without forward movement until they had bedded themselves deep below the surface. These occasions were not numerous so far, but they served to delay matters very considerably, and towards evening Tanami calculated that the whole afternoon's work did not exceed twelve miles.

"That's forty miles for the day, Stuart," he remarked. "Darned good goin', I call it. If we'd been tuggin' a perishin' camel team we could just ha' made 'bout a third o' that."

"If things get no worse," the boy admitted, "the motor will pull us through, though she's been boiling the water away terribly fast."

Twice since leaving Angel Gully the radiator had been replenished, and the engine had become so heated that more than once a voluntary stop had been

made to allow it to cool down. Stuart was now glad that Tanami's well was only twenty miles away. At first he had in thought ridiculed the idea of troubling about water at such an early stage in the journey; but in these last few hours he had gathered experience rapidly. If the bushman had allowed him to take the mapped course he had planned, what would have been the result? The Mastodon was skirting the worst country; he would ignorantly have attempted to take it as it came. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he had nearly wrecked the expedition at the beginning by having any views at all!

The bushman laughed when the boy confided this much to him.

"I'm a stubborn sort o' cuss, Stuart," he said, "an' 'tain't likely I'd let you make what I reckoned was a mistake. The jigger would need stilts instead o' wheels in some parts nor'ard o' this. As it is, we'll hit a bad patch or two afore we're a couple o' days older."

Bob heard this cheerful reflection and groaned in mild complaint:

"The old 'bus has been soakin' into it hard. According to the clock she's mopped up miles of Australia that wouldn't stay in one place. We've made the poor beast into a dredger by carryin' too much weight——"

Tanami was visibly amused.

"We'll dump a few hundredweights in the morning, Bob," he interjected quietly.

"Not the water, surely, old hoss? An' after all, I don't think anything else could be spared."

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"I reckon *we* can be spared all right," returned Tanami definitely. "We ain't cripples, an' at a pinch we can even push. Blow it! young fellow-me-lad, it's downright cruelty to that there box o' machinery for us to squat on top o' it, when it's grindin' its heart out like a human bein'."

M'Crimmon nodded in agreement. He too had been thinking of this for some time.

"Every wee bit helps!" he cried gaily.

And when the plan was tried it did help in some measure, not so much, perhaps, by relieving the weight as by providing a ready assistance to turn the balance when the issue of movement was in any way in doubt. Yet despite the frantic efforts of all, the Mastodon proceeded at a snail's pace, fighting every inch of the way. The wide steel treads which divided the travelling surface over such a great area were instantaneously effective when they could find even moderately stable base beneath, but in places where no semi-solid foundation existed under the wave-like surface, the striving motor had literally to compress the sand it rested upon to a solid before it could make advance. Thus it made its way in a series of writhes and darts, fast enough in themselves but painfully hesitant in their preparatory periods. Mile after mile was crossed in this way, and through it all Stuart nursed the panting engine with anxious care, and fed to it the precious water from the tank as its needs demanded.

Those on foot, by reason of their extra labours, perspired freely in the broiling sun, except Tanami,

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who through long practice had acquired some of the properties of a camel. He exerted himself vigorously, but to all outward appearance remained curiously unaffected by the heat. Indeed, he seemed to revel in his efforts.

Towards nightfall a dim blur appeared on the skyline and was hailed with much relief. It betokened the presence of timber. Somewhere amid the scraggy growth was the well which the first expedition had found so many years before. Now the soil began to harden perceptibly under the Mastodon's tracks, and they gripped with lessening effort. Soon wiry bushes straggled across the route, and these again gave place to pygmy eucalyptus brushwood which covered a gentle upward slope leading to denser vegetation. The bushman scanned the landscape earnestly seeking for a sign that he might recognize, and at last he found it. A little away to the south there was a scarcely discernible break in the timber line, as if some small creek had intervened.

"That's the blessed place," said Tanami with decision. "It's only a pesky little gully, but its got a diorite bottom."

No other member of the party could see anything, so no comment was made. All realized that the eyes of the bushman had a quality almost miraculous, and their faith in him was unbounded. The Mastodon crushed through the lesser saplings in its path as if they were no more than feathers, but before the objective was reached the sun shot out of sight and

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darkness almost immediately descended upon them.

"Just as well to camp here anyways," remarked Tanami. "It's never very healthy alongside water in them parts."

"Why?" asked Bob, puzzled.

"Nigs!" came the laconic answer; then, seeing that the youth was still in doubt, he explained further: "The Blacks 'way out in the bush calc'late that their special god lives where water is, an' they consider it right to kill anything or anybody they find tamperin' wi' the works. An' you've got to remember that they never see a white man, an' most likely would reckon him to be a sort o' evil spirit who'd be better dead."

This information was illuminating; and Bob considered it at some length. It was all very well to speak of the danger from Blacks when one was far away from their habitation; it was a different matter entirely when the real article might be anywhere around. He would like to have had the matter elucidated still more, but meanwhile Stuart was calling for his assistance to tighten up some bolts.

When he duly came along with his spanner he discovered that his companion had other subjects to discuss with him.

"It's the water, Bob," communicated Stuart. "We've used up ten gallons since morning, and the radiator level is pretty low now. We'll have to fill up again."

"Well, what about that, old son? Tanami knows where there is plenty, and we'll barge alongside the

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supply station first thing after breakfast to-morrow. What I'm wondering about is whether the Blacks are cannibals."

"And we've been heavy on the petrol too, Bob," Stuart said a trifle anxiously. He had not noticed his friend's digression.

"It's a good thing we took an extra stock. Never mind; we've got through the worst; an' the old 'bus is goin' strong." He hesitated, then ventured a timely warning in a hoarse whisper: "The Blacks may attack us to-night. See that you have your rifle ready!"

But not a sound was heard all through the night, though Bob, himself restless, noted that Tanami was equally wide awake, for the bushman got up many times during the silent hours and prowled around watchfully. With morning came a sense of relief. The glaring sunlight revealed no lurking forms; it only showed up a welter of drooping shrubs that seemed dry as the soil from which they sprang.

In less than half an hour after a start was made Tanami's well was reached. It was just a rock hole in a diminutive gully protected from enfilading sands by a ring of boulders evidently put there by human agency. When rain fell the cavity would collect the water that drained into it from the surrounding country, and as it had an impervious base, it would retain its supply for many seasons, if untouched.

Tanami went on his knees and peered into the depths.

"Either the nigs have swallowed the lot or there's

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been no rain for years," he muttered in deep disappointment.

Stuart's teeth clenched on his lip; Bob gaped in incredulous amazement; M'Crimmon whistled softly to himself.

The bushman could scarcely believe his eyes. He picked up a pebble and dropped it into the narrow aperture. A feeble splash echoed from the bottom.

"There's a mixture of some sort left," he said; "most likely a pretty strong essence o' snakes, 'goannas an' such like crawlers that have dropped in."

He took the bucket which Stuart had optimistically brought, and prepared to go down himself. On top they soon heard him swishing the bucket about in the darkness.

"No, I reckon I don't want a light," he said in answer to Bob's inquiry; "I can dash well see all I want to see, and then some more."

He sent the result of his labours to the surface, and quickly followed in person.

He found his companions gazing as if mesmerized at a thickish green fluid that contained suspended in solution many ornithological oddments, while the stench that rose from it was indescribable. He looked at them with a grim smile.

"There you are," he said. "I've mined a couple o' gallons o' the stuff, an' you don't seem happy. We can get enough to fill the radiator, an' I reckon it will give a punch to the ole engine that will make it

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sit up an' take notis. The climate down below ain't too bracin', so I'll have a breather for a bit."

"This is a job that fairly whistles for volunteers," spoke M'Crimmon, "an' I'm the cheery backslider that'll tackle the next desp'rit venture. Hand *me* the bucket when you have finished, Stuart. I'll capture the next lot."

Though the task was not inviting, each member of the party took his share of it. Stuart was thankful that his beloved engine would be safe for another day, yet he wondered vaguely what was to happen afterwards. The tank in two days had been drawn on for fully half of its original contents, and only sixty miles had been accomplished. By his figures, over a hundred miles had yet to be negotiated before the Creek of Diamonds would be reached—and then there was no certainty of finding water. Tanami, however, had no doubt about matters when this stage was reached.

"Once there," he said, "we'll get water by sinkin' through the clayey stuff in the channel. Your dad reckoned so, an' he knew."

"A hundred miles isn't so very much," commented Bob, cheerfully. "I'm sure the 'bus will battle through."

Stuart's lips trembled. More than anything in the world he wanted to take the chance, but he felt that he had no right to risk the lives of the others. He said this, haltingly. Gravely Tanami replied: "Something must be left to Providence, my lad, or the job would be too easy. I ain't worryin' any, just yet."

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His calm confidence was inspiring, and the boy was comforted.

The Mastodon did so well after leaving this place that the passengers were once more taken up. The snake juice in the radiator was accredited with this satisfactory happening by the bushman, and no one thought of explaining otherwise. The course was now altered to follow the wooded ridge which stretched in a north-easterly direction; by doing so the heavier country on the flat would be for a time avoided. By twelve o'clock fourteen miles separated them from the rock hole they had left, and everyone was delighted with the progress made. The present direction could not be maintained for long, however; it would take them too far to the north. Tanami was reluctant to make a change, but Nature intervened to make his decision less difficult. The slight elevation they followed quite suddenly began to merge into the plains. The vegetation along the crest grew thinner and thinner, finally ceasing altogether.

"Dash!" said Bob, surveying the desolate vista. "I suppose this is where we get off and work our passage."

They stopped for a hasty lunch before endeavouring to proceed farther. Stuart also wanted to investigate what wastage had taken place in the radiator, and he was much cheered to find the diminution almost negligible. It was, he knew, the low gears that did the damage, and their use could not be avoided in the deeper sand. Still, it was clear that, under even strongly

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adverse conditions, the Mastodon could make a wonderfully efficient showing.

While the billy was being boiled, the four discussed their plans on the shady side of the Mastodon's stout bulk. Stuart brought out his chart, and showed the approximate position by dead reckoning; Tanami noted hastily the space between this and their destination.

"We'd better steer straight into sunrise now," he said reflectively.

Bob had been having a good look at the pencilled line drawn by Stuart, and observed that it diverged to the extent of some degrees north of the horizontal.

"The sun rises in the east and sets in the west," he quoted, with a chuckle. "We'll miss the blessed target, Tanami, if you don't look more carefully!"

He was highly pleased with himself for having, as he thought, caught the bushman napping.

Tanami turned a pensive glance upon the speaker.

"Young Solomon," he said, "the sun an' me are pretty old friends, an' I can tell you he don't make a habit o' risin' precisely in the east, in these parts, unless mebbe once a year to get his balance. I reckon Stuart can explain, for I ain't a scholar."

"Gosh!" muttered Bob, "an' I thought I had a sure thing that time; but I'm the melon as usual."

Stuart was too surprised at the bushman's grasp of meridional variations to say a word. He was learning daily that Nature teaches her children in many diverse ways.

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Presently Tanami mounted to the seat of the motor, and stood aloft, scanning the eastern horizon. He was trying to locate a landmark which would be easier for Stuart to steer by than the silhouette of the car. Where sky and plain met, the line of junction was slightly wavy, but no definite object could be seen which would serve as a guide. His glance took in the nearer distance, and he gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Bob," he cried, "there's something here for you to look at, a darn sight more interestin' than charts."

The youth was beside the bushman in a bound.

"I can't see anything but—but—Why! What are these black dots? An' they're movin' too! Help! It's a whole bunch of natives! Surely—you don't think they are coming here, Tanami?"

"I wish they were, Bob; I reckon I'd like to ask 'em some questions in a way they'd understand."

Bob hurriedly began to search for a pair of binoculars stowed somewhere in the car, and having found what he sought handed them over to Tanami. The powerful glasses opened up a new prospect to the bushman. The wavy sky-line he had seen resolved itself into a gentle undulation bearing unmistakable signs of scattered timber. Evidently it was a tongue of better country running parallel to that they had just left, but extending farther north. Next he looked for the Blacks; he had almost forgotten about them, for, compared with his satisfying view of the farther distance, they had become of little importance.

"They're headin' the same way as we'll be doin'

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in a minute," he grunted. "'Bout a dozen o' them, every darn one carryin' spears an' a waddy."

M'Crimmon swarmed up to have a look, and having seen, he winked ponderously at Bob and smiled joyfully.

"This is where you and me will bask in the lime-light, my bonnie boy," he whispered. "We'll sweep them from our path, as the story-books say. Tanami and Stuart are doin' their bit. Will it be said that a M'Crimmon an' a Murray shirked their heroic task? No, never!"

"Steady on, old sport," remonstrated Bob. "Those fellows are trekkin' along quite peaceable, and besides, they've got spears, an' I don't want to be tickled with any sharp implement. No, I'm dashed if I do! But—but"—his curiosity was rapidly overpowering his sense of caution—"what is the bright idea, anyhow?"

The Seeker after Adventure was for the moment puzzled, but he beamed, craftily, and held up a deprecating hand.

"There ye go already," he grumbled. "Blowin' off at the safety valve wi' a hundred pounds to the square inch showing on the dial. Fair burstin' wi' bravery ye are, my lad—But mum's the word! We'll work out a bonnie scheme together."

Tanami eyed the pair sternly.

"Them nigs," he said, "ain't lookin' for trouble, an' neither are we. Anyway, they'll clear like red-shanks when they hear us behind, so there ain't no need to worry."

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A little later the expedition resumed its journey, and almost at once was struggling in the yielding sands of the treeless plain. Yet though the Mastodon's tracks ground deep they met with a firmer resistance than had been experienced on the previous afternoon, and progress, if slow, was doggedly sure. The bushman's rough estimate made it about twelve miles to the welcoming timber country he had seen through the field-glasses, and it was everyone's desire to reach the favoured track before sundown. Stuart's one anxiety was the engine. It was hopeless trying to keep it cool in such arduous circumstances, and he could only pray that the water would last out. He relinquished the wheel to Bob after a while, who again gave place to M'Crimmon when his energies had recuperated. In this way each of the three had brief respite from the trying toil he found on foot. As for Tanami, he was tireless, and lent his aid ceaselessly without a murmur.

The Blacks were no longer in sight. The roar of the Mastodon had alarmed them, and by this time they were doubtless fleeing wildly in the vicinity of the timber belt, seeking for shelter from the pursuing demon. Nevertheless Bob was quite certain that the Mastodon would inexorably overtake them. He had been having a hurried conversation with M'Crimmon in his spare moments, and that wily gentleman had evolved a scheme in which these same Blacks had prominent place. He dilated on his ingenious plan during a halt while Stuart was refilling the radiator.

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"I've worked it a' oot," he gloated. "Just think o' it! A perfect labour-saving device just howlin' to be utilized. Good horse-power runnin' to waste. It's against the principles o' an engineer to see energy rompin' around in such a sinfu' fashion. Furthermore an' forby, an' in conclusion, so to speak, this brilliant brain-wave o' mine will economize water——"

"Gosh!" burst out Bob, sudden enlightenment dawning upon him; "you don't mean to say you'd conscript the blacks to do the pushin'——?"

"Pullin' would gie greater efficiency," calmly returned the other. "The coaxing whisper o' the engine astern would inspire enthusiasm, which is a vera beneficial quality—at times. Work, my lad, is the salvation o' the idle, an' I can see that we're goin' to be a blessin' in disguise to the poor heathen."

Nothing more was said on the subject for a considerable time, during which the Mastodon and all hands battled prodigiously. The belt of scraggy timber now loomed out clearly ahead, and not more than three miles away.

"We'll make it easily, Stuart," Tanami commented. "An' our camel hasn't stuck us up once, though its been mighty hard goin'—unless when we had to stop to give her a drink." This recollection caused a frown to cross his features. "It's thirsty work," he added. "I reckon if we could get along without swilling so much ourselves, we wouldn't need to worry, but I'll nose around to-night before sundown. If there's a drop o' damp within miles I reckon I'll find it."

The sand had become much firmer now, and the motor began to push forward more freely.

"All aboard!" cried Stuart, hesitating to slow down, even for an instant, lest the momentum might not be regained. Gladly they clutched at the Mastodon as it drew away from them, and climbed to their accustomed seats. Immediately he had settled down, Bob turned to his companion, who appeared to be cogitating deeply.

"I suppose you were joking in what you said about the Blacks," he whispered in M'Crimmon's ear.

The engineer made no answer for fully a minute; then he made a clean breast of it.

"It was just a wild fancy, laddie, meant to amuse you, but the funny thing is, I've thought of it seriously since then. It's no' an impossible proposition, an' there's an auld sayin', 'Needs must when the devil drives', which fits in very comfortably."

"But how—how are we to capture them—even if we see the beggars again, which isn't likely? I shouldn't like to shoot them and I don't see any other way."

M'Crimmon shook his head vigorously.

"I'm a man o' peace, Bob, an' whiles a man o' strategy; but I'm devoid o' murderin' instincts, an' besides, a crippled nig would be a mighty poor power-generator. No, my bold bad pirate chief, we must use the guile o' the serpent to lure the wily savage from his lair. Once I get my arms round him, I'll gie him such a persuasive hug that he'll follow like Mary's lamb. If we've the luck to run across a

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native camp, you'll see how easily the job will be done."

Bob was duly impressed, but not convinced.

"But where do I come in?" he demanded. "I don't think I'd be much good at the Samson business."

"All you'd have to do, Bob, would be to let them see you strollin' round careless-like, wi' me hidin' in the vicinity——"

"Not for me!" the youth declared decisively. "I'm not built for speed, an' I'm dashed if you're goin' to use me for bait."

M'Crimmon looked forlorn.

"Man, it would be a grand adventure," he remarked enticingly. Then he relapsed into thoughtful silence and tried to work out a more attractive method of achieving his earnest purpose.

A camp was made on comparatively firm ground with yet an hour till sundown, and then Tanami seized his rifle and prepared to make off into the thickest part of the scrub. He would allow no one to accompany him in case the presence of another might distract his mind and prevent concentration on his search.

"I reckon I should be back in an hour or two," he said. "I dunno how far I may have to chase around, an' I can get home in the dark if you keep the fire goin' strong."

He had been gone less than five minutes when he made a hurried reappearance.

"The nigs ain't very far away," he announced.

"I see their tracks everywhere about—an' I can smell 'em! Mebbe it would be better to douse the fire after dark. Nigs are curious cusses when they get riled." He hesitated for an instant. Then addressed Stuart:

"If you think there's danger, just let the engine snort. That should scare 'em."

He strode off again with a lighter step than before. If natives remained for the night when they had ample time to go farther there must be a reason for their lingering, and it must be a rather cogent reason, too, since fear of the Mastodon had not driven them onwards. Thus Tanami thought and felt comforted.

Bob and M'Crimmon set about preparing the evening meal. Stuart started to replace a sparking plug which had not been firing as it should. All three were in a gloomy frame of mind because of the bushman's insistence on going out alone. Each was just a shade piqued that he should not have been chosen to share whatever risk there might be. And to them suddenly came the spirit of emulation. Stuart was the first to give it expression.

"I don't want anything to eat until Tanami comes back," he said. "I think I'll stroll around a bit——"

"Me too!" cried Bob ambiguously, leaving his post by the fire and grabbing his rifle, which was lying near.

It was apparent to them all, however, that it would be unwise to leave the camp absolutely deserted. One must stay behind in case Tanami returned earlier than he expected, or to give the signal arranged by the

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bushman in the unlikely event of the Blacks' approach. Stuart had until now heard nothing of M'Crimmon's wild plan, which had been confided to Bob's ear alone.

"If you did manage to capture one of the Blacks we might find out from him where the nearest water is," he said hopefully. "I suppose it's worth trying."

"We arranged the whole programme this afternoon," broke in Bob eagerly. Until that moment his enthusiasm for accompanying the lanky Scot had not been very marked.

"All right," Stuart said, with a sigh; "I'll wait."

He watched the two until they vanished among the shadeless mulga and iron-bark trees upon which the declining sun was showering its last torrid rays. He was alone in this great land of silence, and thirst, and mystery; alone and so utterly helpless. A feeling of desolation swept into his heart which he strove vainly to conquer. His responsibility had been too great for his years. He felt that in some way he had failed in his reasoning and so brought about a position of uncertainty which should never have been allowed to exist. In the west, the sky, blood-red, appeared to him as an omen of dread. He shivered, though the heat was still oppressive, and for a dangerous instant almost abandoned himself to the weakness threatening him. Then swiftly reaction came, and he jeered at himself for his foolish imaginings. "Surely I'm not afraid?" he said aloud. "Tanami is really carrying the weight and not I, and yet he always looks the same no matter what comes along to worry him. Then M'Crimmon



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can laugh and make jokes when all that I'm thinking of is—dead men's bones—our own bones, of course. Bob, too, knows quite well what we may be up against in another day, and yet he only gets funnier than ever."

He went over to the motor and examined the tank at the rear. "Tanami was right," he thought. "We must be drinking a terrible lot, and I'll try to save my share for the engine. It'll be pretty terrible at first, but I'll get used to it." His resolution cheered him considerably, and hope and faith returned to him in a life-giving flood.

A subdued chattering in the scrub attracted his attention. At first he thought it came from a school of cockatoos he had seen a little while before. But no! there was a distinctly human note in the medley of sound he heard. His heart began to beat rapidly. His peering eyes had caught sight of a black figure! Then another and another came into view. The boy noticed quickly that they carried spears, but evidently they had not seen him yet, for their gaze was fixed on the Mastodon, and their wild eyes were bulging in terror. Stuart stood stock still in the belief that his presence had been unnoticed, but soon he realized that he was being accepted as part of the fittings. They pointed at him, jabbering among themselves, and to his horror one poised a spear as if to throw it. The boy had scarce realized the action before the weapon was struck down by the other natives, who then turned with a yell and rushed back whence they came. There

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remained the unkempt savage who had been balked in his attempt to throw the spear. His attitude was clearly one of doubt. Soon he began to edge forward foot by foot and so slowly that he seemed not to move at all.

Stuart's first thought was to make a quick dash to the starting switch, but to his surprise he found himself reasoning logically that the result of such action might alarm Tanami needlessly, for the roar of the Mastodon would be heard for miles. Instead, he made a crouching spring for his rifle, which lay against a gnarled sapling about a dozen feet away.

The shriek of the startled Black rang in his ears; it was followed immediately by the vicious whiz of a spear that drove harmlessly overhead. Had the barbed missile been flung with the usual precision of a savage, the boy's life would have ended there and then. As it was, he merely glimpsed the deadly shaft in its flight and laughed at the wide aim of the thrower. Before the rifle was in his grasp another spear zipped so close to his ear that the wind created by its passage fanned his cheek. Instinctively he flattened himself to the ground and just in time to escape a third whistling dart. No longer doubting the skill of his adversary, and now thoroughly aroused, Stuart, from his prone position, took a quick shot at the prancing warrior, who was already celebrating his supposed victory.

The bullet found its mark. A weird scream issued from the lips of the savage. His grotesque antics culminated in a wild leap into the air; then he turned and

limped back into the bush with surprising rapidity.

"Anyhow, I haven't hurt him much," the boy reflected, his anger cooling swiftly as he watched the wounded Black desperately seeking safety in retreat. "I aimed low on purpose, so I must have plugged him in the leg. Now, if M'Crimmon had been here he could have roped that chap in without much trouble."

He checked his musings suddenly, as an astonishing thought flashed into his brain.

"M'Crimmon?" he muttered; "why shouldn't I do it myself? I don't think the beggar's got any more spears, for he threw at least three at me—and he won't be able to run very fast."

His decision was made before the words found utterance.

He snatched a coil of rope from one of the boxes on the ground, and with this in one hand and his rifle in the other made a determined dash after the Black. It did not occur to him that there was any particular danger. The wounded native might show fight, certainly, but he had always understood that the Australian aboriginal was a poor specimen of humanity at the best, and his resistance would be more noisy than effective at close quarters. He had a momentary qualm of doubt when a twinge of pain in his arm reminded him of his own unfitness at the time for a rough-and-tumble mêlée. The lamentations of the escaping savage were a sure enough guide to the strenuous pursuer, and in a few minutes the quarry was in sight.

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The growing gloom of approaching night was creating fantastic shadows in the motionless pygmy forest, and the black body of the native was not easily distinguishable from its surroundings. With a suppressed whoop Stuart increased his pace, stumbling over fallen timber and crashing through the brittle undergrowth in his impulsive eagerness. Had the warrior ahead not been so intent on his own shrill bewailings he would surely have heard the noise the boy made in his passage. "He can't be so badly damaged as all that," thought Stuart. "He couldn't get along so fast if anything serious was the matter. Maybe—maybe he isn't really howling for that at all—he might be shrieking out some warning to the others, for all that I know."

It was well that he allowed for this latter possibility in time. He had utterly forgotten about the rest of the band until now, and he was already too far away from the Mastodon for his liking. Reluctantly he slackened speed, and just then the fleeing savage stopped, and also ceased his cries. He was less than fifty yards away from Stuart, and where he halted there grew a cluster of smooth-boled trees that were straighter and slightly taller than their rough-barked neighbours. The boy crept behind a sheltering shrub, and through the branches watched the surprising actions of his intended captive. The Black had started to dig furiously into the loose soil with his hands, unearthing in the process sundry white objects, which he swallowed with great gusto. To the looker-on it was a puzzling and amazing spectacle, and he gazed, wondering and fascinated.

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Out of the darkening scrub some half-dozen be-dizened warriors now evolved as if by magic. Without a word they laid hold upon their wounded tribesman, and bore him off in their midst. And now the bush beyond seemed to be alive with hasty movement and excited murmurings; twigs crackled, branches broke asunder, and a dull rhythmic note began to pulsate through the air.

For the first time Stuart experienced a sense of fear. Were preparations being made for an attack on the Mastodon? The sun had set, and darkness was spreading her pall over the landscape. He looked back as he had come and was reassured by the glow of the camp fire through the intervening trees; it would guide his returning tracks—but it would also guide the enemy. He decided to retrace his steps immediately, and blanket the fire as Tanami had instructed; but first he would see what the savage had been digging that he relished so much. He moved stealthily on and felt for the trees he had observed to be different from others; in the deep shadows now prevailing no differentiation could be made by sight alone. He groped in the crumbling dryness at their base, and presently his fingers touched and recoiled from a clammy substance. He was not to be deterred by his first repugnance; he thrust down his hand again and drew forth a mollusc-like object which yielded to pressure like a miniature balloon.

"I suppose they're all right to eat," Stuart whispered to himself, with a shudder at the thought.

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"Anyhow, I'll get one or two to show Tanami. He's sure to be interested."

Wrapping the specimens he collected in his handkerchief, he placed this in the pocket of his open shirt, then looked about for the fire glimmer that would direct the speediest way of return. He could not locate the welcome beacon at first; he had come a little too far and some trees were obscuring it. So he started off to reduce the distance until it would come into view again. He walked, as he thought, about a hundred yards before he saw a feeble gleam just a little way in front. Vague echoes now seemed to surround him, and the monotonous drumming which had ceased for a space began again with a harsher note than before. "I expect Bob and M'Crimmon have got back and have dowsed the fire," he muttered. "They'll be worrying about me now, I suppose." He hurried forward, anxious to quell the alarm of his companions, then just on the verge of the narrow illuminated circle, he drew back with a choking gasp of sheer horror. It was not Bob and M'Crimmon who were within the zone of light. It was a group of naked savages that clustered near the dying embers, and each was laden with war-like equipment. In the centre a hideously bescarred creature stood, daubed with white, and of terrifying countenance. With shrivelled arm that moved slowly yet with clockwork regularity he beat at an unseen object which at each concussion emitted a death-like and hollow sound. At close quarters the measured reverberations were as those of a tolling bell.

To Stuart they crashed out like a knell of doom.

It was fully a minute before the boy realized that the camp he looked upon was not the one he had left, transformed by the fierce-looking horde who now possessed it. The dim bulk of the Mastodon was nowhere in evidence and it could not have been spirited away. Then again, this camp appeared to be in a clearing in the heart of the wood, and the Mastodon had come to rest at the beginning of the timber. When this full knowledge dawned upon him he felt a great relief. He could not imagine how he had come here, but it was assuredly most urgent that he should make immediate escape before he was discovered. He looked in the heavens for the Southern Cross, and decided to steer west by keeping the constellation well to his left. This direction would bring him back to the open plain, where he would quickly see even the distant light of Mastodon camp—unless it had been purposely subdued. In the latter case all would still be well, for it would indicate that his comrades were prepared for the threatening attack, and as for himself, he did not much care where he passed the night, so long as they were safe.

Very cautiously he began to retreat, thankful now for the darkness which formerly he had feared; still he found that his purpose was not to be so easily achieved. The aged native who had been responsible for the funereal orchestral effects suddenly ceased his languid labours, and began to harangue his restless audience in a high toneless voice.

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While he was speaking a hush fell on the assembly so that the slightest movement in the vicinity would be at once noticeable. Stuart waited impatiently for the orator to finish, expecting that in the hubbub he would be enabled to steal away without attracting attention. The spokesman, he thought, must be a sort of medicine-man such as he had read of in books, and he would probably be conveying to the warriors the messages received from the spirits he conjured up through the medium of his appalling groaning instrument which now lay discarded at his feet. As the speech of the weird old savage proceeded, it was obvious that the listening circle was much impressed; rolling eyes were turned upon the speaker, and occasionally murmurs as if of fear passed through the throng.

The palaver ceased, and at once a wild chattering arose. Now was Stuart's time to escape. He turned, and had taken but one step when a rending crackle in the brushwood directly in his line of escape caused him to halt. Someone was clearly in wait in that direction. The disturbance was of too definite a nature to pass unnoticed by the Blacks around the fire.

In an instant they came swarming towards him, all but the medicine-man. With sinking heart the boy cocked his rifle, and a cry rose involuntarily to his lips: "Tanami!" And lo! a well-known figure bounded out of the shadows on the farther side of the clearing, and grappled with the medicine-man, whose shrieks rang fearfully into the night.

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"Don't shoot, my lad," the bushman's voice called out. "They daren't hurt you while I've got this old sinner here."

The approaching savages were within a few yards of the boy when the screams of Tanami's captive created consternation among them. They hesitated, uttering strange cries, then a few came on while the bulk dashed madly back. The boy's recollection of further happenings was vague. His startled senses had scarcely grasped the import of what was occurring, before they received another shock. From the scrub at his back, whence the first alarm had come, there now issued the crash of a breaking branch, followed by a double thud, and a gasped imprecation. Like a bolt from a catapult a lean form shot past him and hurled itself upon the foremost native, forcing him back upon his fellows. Flail-like arms arose ghostly through the gloom, smiting heavily and indiscriminately, and the voice of the smiter jerked into the night in unmelodious song. Like a whirlwind he passed on to the succour of the bushman, who seemed likely to be sore beset.

"Gosh!" said someone in admiring tones out of the darkness near by. "He's a real dandy in a scrimmage."

"Come on!" cried Stuart, realizing who was beside him. "We're needed badly, I think."

Together they rushed to the fray in the wake of M'Crimmon. A fallen Black, struggling to his feet as they passed, swung at them with his waddy. The blow

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lacked strength, but Bob, taking it in the rear as he ran, was urged forward to greater effort. Before them they dimly saw the Blacks disperse and flee, and in triumph they reached the bushman's side. He was kicking the fire into a blaze when they arrived. The hostile scene of a minute before now showed a vastly altered aspect. If the boys expected an appreciation of their prowess they received none. Tanami looked from one to the other very gravely, and said:

"So we're all here! I reckon I mentioned that I didn't want company, an' yet ye roll up an' cause trouble which might ha' meant a funeral. I had spotted all I wanted, but it didn't seem worth a possum's kick——"

He noticed the look of disappointment on the youthful faces, and at once altered his tone. "Of course, you weren't to know that nigs are the curiosest cusses in the world, an' darn dangerous when they get close. I ain't just talkative enough to explain things mebbe. Anyways, I reckon I've got a mighty fine lot o' mates—ain't skeert at nothin'!"

This, from Tanami, was praise indeed.

M'Crimmon ceased wandering around on the edge of the clearing and joined his companions. He had not come off quite scathless in the brief encounter, and he patted his head tenderly where a waddy had got in a glancing stroke.

"I'm wounded," he complained lugubriously. "A hefty chap wi' a face like a burst tar barrel did the cruel deed, an' but for the hardness o' my skull I

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might have been numbered wi' the slain. Am I the only sinfu' backslider that bears an honourable scar o' the fearfu' conflict?"

"I don't know about the honourable scar," grumbled Bob. "I got what you might call an ignominious wallop that didn't hit me on a hard place, and I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to sit down again. Just my rotten luck as usual. Oh, of course, laugh! I'm the giddy goat all right."

"I reckon the laugh will keep, Bob," Tanami consoled, expressing unconsciously a truth that the lad knew full well. "We've got to do a bit o' worryin' now."

He explained his movements since he had left the camp. He had taken a circuit for miles in the hope of locating some sign of moisture in the parched scrub land, and had finally traced a tiny watercourse which led directly to the clearing occupied by the Blacks.

"I lay doggo in the bush an' watched them," he said. "I reckoned there was water somewheres near, an' that they had hidden it. But them nigs was like camels; they didn't seem to want any drink, until just after sundown a black son o' a gun came along sick an' howling for Bubba. The old joker wi' the tom-tom seemed real worried, an' he came out near to where I was hidin' an' scraped some old timber away——"

"I knew all the time you had found it," broke in Bob.

Tanami seized a burning log from the fire, and

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using it as a torch, led the way to a spot less than a score of yards distant. Here a cup-shaped depression showed, littered with debris and loose sand, and in the very centre a plentiful supply of withered twigs was strewn. Kicking these aside he thrust the flaming brand into the depths disclosed. A thin slimy mud appeared at the bottom, but nothing more.

"We *might* squeeze out a gallon or two," said the bushman. "We'll come over in the morning and have a try."

"Well, the Mastodon has a dashed good digestion," Bob said cheerily, "that's one blessing."

On the way back to camp the bushman very simply accounted for the wild stampede of the Blacks. The near presence of the Mastodon, which they imagined to be an evil spirit, alarmed them, and the drying of the well, and the sudden sickness of one of the warriors, were ascribed to its baleful influence. The latter event hurried matters.

"The hoodoo man battered away at his drum for a good bit afore he gave in," he remarked; "but I calc'late he made up his mind pretty sudden, all the same. A spirit that can make a nig sick had a darn big argument. They were scared to death when I grabbed the old chap at the finish."

Stuart could hold his news back no longer.

"I'm glad I was of some use after all," he said, "for I was the spirit that did the damage, and you will find the spears of the 'sick' man sticking somewhere around to prove that I didn't shoot without cause."

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Bob and M'Crimmon were particularly disgusted with this information. The former was very sorrowful.

"My luck again," he muttered. "The best I could do was to roost on a tree like a fowl, waiting for something to happen, an' I nearly fell off too. That's what started the trouble."

"Things were gettin' a wee bit slow," murmured M'Crimmon blandly. "I'll no' deny that I gave you some gentle encouragement."

"Well I'm dashed. You bloodthirsty sinner!"

The gaunt engineer chuckled.

'You'll no' forget that I kept whisperin' in your ear to run back, not forrard. If you insist on being brave you shouldna blame me."

The bright blaze of Mastodon camp was now in view, and looking back into the darkness Stuart could also see the red glow they had so recently left.

"It must have been about here I got slewed in my bearings," he exclaimed. "I had been watching my savage digging things from the foot of a tree and—why, I'd forgotten that I've got some of the stuff in my pocket. I'll show you when we get into the light."

Tanami at once showed extraordinary interest.

"If it's what I think," he said, "you've mebbe saved the whole outfit. I won't say nothin' more till I see what you've got. I reckon it don't do to cheer too sudden."

Back by the fire, while M'Crimmon and Bob hastened to prepare the long-delayed meal, Stuart took from his shirt pocket the handkerchief in which he

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had wrapped the dubious specimens. In the grey dusk they had not been over attractive to look at, and he expected to view them with even less enthusiasm in a stronger light.

Gingerly he undid the folds and exposed to view—nothing save a few fibrous and flattened skins, that might have been once the enclosing fabric of some organism, but were certainly no longer so. The boy gazed at these relics in mingled dismay and disgust. In their earlier state they might have provided suitable provender for the none too fastidious aborigines, but he could hardly imagine that any white man would swallow the curious things. He examined the handkerchief minutely, but the most careful scrutiny supplied no clue to the mystery. Whatever he had found had vanished, leaving only the empty cases behind. Whether they had been of vegetable or animal nature he had not the slightest idea. He looked up to find the bushman surveying him quizzically, and he regretted he had mentioned his ridiculous “find”.

“I put them there, all right,” he said, “but that’s all I see left. I must have squashed them when I pressed against the tree I was hiding behind. I remember feeling something cold go right through to my skin.”

He put his hand into the empty pocket and shivered. It was damp to the touch.

Tanami picked up the discarded handkerchief, and squeezed from it several drops of moisture; then he clapped the boy heartily on the shoulder.

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"I reckon you've done a splendid night's work, lad," he said. "I've seen nigs carryin' them perishin' grubs about, but they would never tell where they found them."

"Grubs?" echoed Stuart. "The dashed things were like little balloons. They grow at the foot of the tree with the shiny bark."

"They're called 'bardies', Stuart. I reckon they is a kind o' slug that eats all the moisture outen some kind o' trees, an' if you've spotted the tree, we won't need to go thirsty yet a bit."

The boy made a wry face, at which the bushman laughed heartily.

"If you can swallow an oyster, a bardie will be easy goin'. It's just a nat'ral water-supply which mebbe Providence—though I'm too ignorant to understand 'bout them things—puts on tap for the thirsty nig in them dry parts."

Bob drew near with resolution shining in his eye. He had heard the most of the conversation and was profoundly interested.

"I'll eat the dashed things if I have to," he proclaimed, "but as a student of Natural History, I've got an idea that the old Mastodon could wolf them up without turning a hair—the cases would dissolve in hot water, an' I don't think the radiator will do anything less than boil on this picnic, so where's the trouble?"

"We'll all have a good try at them before I risk choking the water-jacket of the engine," said Stuart with firmness. "I'm not going to consider my

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taste. I'll go thirsty until I forget I've got a taste."

"Tea's ready!" bawled M'Crimmon, "an' I've cooked a bonnie damper fu' o' slugs—grubs I should say. No, blow it! I mean currants—an' I hope ye don't think they're—something else, at an awkward moment. As for me I'm sure that I'll have a dream this night, an' think old Willie wi' the drum, that we saw across the way, is beatin' bardies down my throat."

CHAPTER VII

The Creek of Diamonds

In the region of Latitude 20° S. Longitude 132° E. the chance wanderer travelling against the route of the sun would probably see nothing inspiring in the landscape and would equally probably at this point be possessed of but one abiding purpose—to pursue his way with all possible speed towards more favourable country. For even to the eye of knowledge this area seems parched beyond all others; it breathes thirst with all its lingering horrors, and emanates fear; its spell is brooding melancholy, which in turn brings hopelessness and despair.

Yet native tracks can be picked up in the sand—if one is watchful for such signs—and natives in the flesh would surely be seen if the weary pilgrim halted in his forward march. A little farther south nature appears not quite so sombre, for the surface of the plain is here broken by what seems at a moderate distance to be a low range of sun-blackened hills.

But the experienced traveller in such a land as this will shun all broken tracts, for he knows that uprearing sandstone radiates a fierce heat, far worse than he will meet on the open flats, and the rough debris in its

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vicinity makes progression even more difficult than does loose sand. Experience therefore teaches avoidance of bare elevations when it is almost certain that these will be but solidified protrusions of the mass from which they spring, and so in this case the chance wanderer aforesaid will, if necessary, deviate from his course to pass the obstruction with a good clearance to the north.

However, these same weathering hills are not what they seem. Time was when they must have been of imposing aspect, showing to east and west myriad peaks and angular projections. But the years have ruthlessly laid them low, taking away bit by bit the outside evidence of their structure, and giving them deceptive hues in the slow process of oxidation. So much depends upon the nature of a rock in unknown territory. It is in itself an indication of good or evil import, signifying much to the initiated. Desert sandstone, for instance, would not encourage one to look for water in the neighbourhood. Limestone, on the other hand, usually proclaims the presence of water in some degree, and the blackened range was limestone!

At fairly close view it presented a serrated appearance, lost in the greater distance. Its crags and spires were blunted and mouldering, and innumerable crevices and crannies appeared in the more solid bulk below. The extreme length of the mass was not greater than a mile. Towards the middle it appeared to have considerable thickness, presenting to the eye

an elliptical bulge, with a rim like a battlement. The entire formation had at no place a greater height than a hundred feet, yet so steeply did the sides uprise from the base, that to climb to the crest of the ridge would be a formidable if not impossible task.

On the morning following the flight of the Blacks from the dried-up soak, a strange figure stood on an eminence of these limestone bluffs, gazing long and earnestly towards the west. It was that of a man, bent with age, and of patriarchal aspect. His countenance was swarthy, but not of aboriginal blackness, his facial colouring pertaining more to a dark olive. His features were arresting. His nose, far from being of the squat negroid variety, curved like an eagle's beak, and two flashing eyes, deep-set under bushy fringes, gave an expression of alertness—or it may have been fanaticism. He had a long white beard which descended to his waist. For clothing he wore a loosely fitting robe, to all appearance finely woven of some delicate vegetable material. As he watched, he communed with himself in a strange language; and he seemed ill at ease.

"They come!" was the purport of his speech. "They come to disturb the solitude of my people; to wrest from a dying race the secret of its poor heritage. My forefathers have viewed the ravishing of our once rich possessions—not by man's hand but by the judgment of the All Wise. O ye covetous of the land! of what avail are the worldly riches ye seek? Where a bounteous river once flowed ye will find but

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the dross of earth, and in the finding ye would destroy the remnant of a line sunk already near to savagedom. But a few more years I ask for them and they shall cumber the earth no more. But a few years and ye may take all that the encroaching sands have left. . . . I am the last of a tribe accursed, whose doom was sealed in ages past, when first our fathers fled from the oppressor——”

He called out sharply: “Ibrahim!”

A tall native, whose dress was merely a loin-cloth made out of an animal's untanned skin, answered the summons. In appearance he showed the strain of Asiatic origin, only his colour was almost that of ebony, and the light of intellect gleamed not at all in the lustreless vacant eyes.

He emerged from an outlet in the rock which apparently communicated with some chamber below, and stood in an attitude of respectful attention before the old man.

“They come,” spoke the Patriarch. “I know not when they may reach our sunken waters. It is for you to watch. Stay not their progress if they should press onward. Let them go their way in peace. But should they tarry, seize them and bring them hither.”

“Master! They may carry the hidden thunder which slew Yacomb.”

“If so it be, then does our law hold good. ‘A life for a life.’ It is just.”

He who was called Ibrahim turned to depart, but the aged chief had further things to say:

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"Ibrahim, my son, the airs whisper to me that a smoking engine bears the invaders to our poor domain. The message wafted through the heavens speaks of an evil spirit encased in metal which cries with a loud voice, but in my greater knowledge I know this to be but the work of man even as in our far-back history we ourselves created mighty birds which flew upon the water. Yet the sands that encompass us may bring about the destruction of this monster, for surely they are merciless as our ancient seas. Go! Assemble a score of chosen warriors, but no more. Their impatience and growing fierceness might defeat my purpose. For I say, kill not, and he who disobeyeth shall himself find death. Go! Watch and wait, that ye may not be found unready."

Ibrahim swung out of sight as silently as he had appeared, and the venerable one returned to his study of the western skies. A slight cloud, so tenuous that it seemed no more than a gossamer haze, floated lazily just above the far horizon. A further feathery shape of similar nature quickly made its appearance, drifting upwards immediately beneath the first, then another and another wreathing mist shot into view at irregular intervals, so that the curtain of sky was soon alive with nebulous specks and patches. The heavens were declaring their message to the watcher on the heights.

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Seventy miles away the Mastodon was battling strenuously and to some purpose, with all its crew on

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board. It left a wake that was as a clean swath in a sea of gold. The sun, nearly at its zenith, was like a great brazen ball thrust out from the sky in stereoscopic relief. Its rays seemed to suspend in the lower air, making phantasmic eddies through which the eye saw vaguely; waves of filmy heat-mists pulsated over the scorching sands, and the circlet of the horizon appeared blurred and wavy and ludicrously close.

All at once Stuart uttered a shout of joy:

"I see a mountain. It's quite near. Look! We've maybe come faster than we thought."

Tanami, sitting beside him, grunted incredulously, but shading his eyes with his hand he gazed in the direction indicated by the boy's pointing finger. Yes, there was certainly the semblance of a rugged rocky ridge to be seen. Still, though he saw, the bushman shook his head.

"'Tain't there, lad," said he. "That blinkin' pictur' ain't real."

"A mirage!" Bob exclaimed, craning his neck to look, "an' we're runnin' right into it!"

Even while he spoke the vision came into clearer focus; for a moment it remained thus in full view, then it jerkily transported itself upwards as an imperfectly adjusted moving picture might do on a screen, and slowly dissolved into empty space.

From his store of knowledge, M'Crimmon provided a few welcome crumbs.

"I've seen them jokers often," he admitted, "at sea as well as on land. You can always tell when

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they're no' true by lookin' at the bottom. There is aye a line o' weakness at the foundation, for a mirage hasna got any. It just floats in the air like a spook. A' the same a mirage is no more a story-teller than I am, for it's a real photograph if no' actual substance, a real photograph projected in the sun's magic lantern."

A little before midday they halted, and Stuart unpacked his sextant. Fairly steady progress had been made since the start that morning, and even Tanami agreed that it was time to fix the actual position on the chart, and make a course direct to the object of their quest.

With the utmost care the young navigator took the necessary observations, Bob standing near with the chronometer to mark the time and record the figures given. The rim of the visible earth's surface was clearly defined, and there was no necessity for employing artificial aids to assure the correctness of the angles taken.

"I make the latitude twenty degrees forty minutes, and the longitude one hundred and thirty degrees eight minutes," Stuart announced, not very long afterwards. "We're too far north, Tanami, by about twenty miles."

The bushman nodded. "I wanted to keep clear o' the dry country down there," he commented, waving his hand towards the south. "I reckon we can shoot straight for the creek now. I calc'late it should be 'bout sixty miles into sunrise."

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"Not so much," said Stuart, making a rapid calculation. "Fifty is nearer."

"Hoorah!" cried Bob. "The old 'bus has been just rompin' along. Maybe—maybe we could have a real drink now?"

His eagerness was of no avail.

"I don't like *them* any more than you do," Stuart said, with a grimace, "but we've got to stick it out. We need every drop we've got for the engine——"

M'Crimmon drew forth a bucket filled with globular substances and offered it to Bob.

"What more do ye want, my sylph-like fairy lad? Here's a labour-saving device for your poor overworked innards—food and drink at one go. Help yersel'."

And the youth partook of the fare thus given and said no more.

In the shade of the Mastodon Stuart diligently filled in the gaps in his chart and plotted the course afresh.

"We might make it by to-morrow night," he said, "if I shake things up a bit."

"We'd better camp well on this side o' the gully if we don't get in afore dark," Tanami remarked, with meaning. "It's a different sort o' nig we've got to tackle 'bout here, as I've mighty good reason to know, though I never got near enough to see the sweeps. We want to have a bit o' daylight to begin the circus and get them frightened off, so's we can sink a shaft in the creek in peace. I reckon we should strike water in 'bout twelve feet there."

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"We'll surely be able to see some signs of where Dad has been," said Stuart earnestly.

"We'll find out all right, my dear lad," gravely returned the bushman. "If the nigs speared him I'll get the news out o' them. But somehow I reckon they ain't to blame even though they gave me such a bad time afterwards. We'll see, my lad; we'll see."

However, by sunset the following day they were still a good dozen miles distant from their destination. Trouble had developed in one of the cylinders, which was losing compression badly in consequence. Stuart guessed that an exhaust valve had burnt out, but was loath to stop to make repairs so long as the Mastodon could crawl along at reduced speed. The disorder had been noted in the early afternoon when the speedometer indicated only a bare twenty miles to go. It would be so much easier to dismantle the heavy cylinder head castings at the creek than out in the open. The surface of the ground, too, was hardening perceptibly, lessening considerably the engine strain. So the Mastodon limped along for eight miles under its handicap before approaching darkness caused a halt. Tanami was dolefully concerned over the occurrence. He imagined that the mechanical camel had developed a complaint which might prove irremediable, and it was chiefly his anxiety to reach the creek that influenced the others.

"We could make the distance easily in the daylight even if I took time to put in a new valve

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before we leave to-morrow," said Stuart that night.

"If there's a kick left in her, I'd rather see ourselves alongside before you disturb the beast," Tanami replied. "You see, she's got our whole outfit aboard, an' mebbe she won't carry it farther if you annoy her by knockin' her about wi' a hammer an' spanner."

There was a subtle wisdom in the bushman's remark. Anything might happen in the process of a hurried repair, and at this stage a prolonged delay would spell disaster. He had not yet acquired the confidence in engineering works which was possessed by one and all of his companions.

"I'll do the job for you, Stuart, when we get there," M'Crimmon said. "You'll have lots to think about, an' I can save you worryin' wi' machinery if I'm no' much use otherwise."

The boy was grateful, and said so, but he knew he could never trust the work of repairing the Mastodon's engine to any other hands than his own. Even Bob might not set the valve truly, and M'Crimmon had never seen the delicate works. He was accustomed to cumbrous machinery where the error of a hair-breadth might not be noticed.

"Ah weel, my lad," the gaunt Scot continued, quick to notice the reluctance in the boy's manner; "mebbe ye'll trust me more some o' them days, an' I'll aye be standin' by."

He looked so sorrowful that Stuart hastened to appease him.

"I know so little," he said. "Only the works of

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the motor, but I understand every bit of it. You understand so many things, and I hope you aren't angry because I'm jealous, really jealous of the Mas-todon."

M'Crimmon patted him on the shoulder and replied, quite solemnly for him: "I like ye better for that, Stuart. It's a dependable man that's jealous o' his work."

Stuart had been thinking towards evening that it was time the mountains mentioned by Tanami as being no great distance from Diamond Creek showed up. He had expected to see them before now, and their failure to materialize caused him much mis-giving. What if his calculations had been wrong, and the Expedition was now nowhere in the neighbourhood anticipated? The thought alarmed him, and he struggled with it in secret, not daring to give it voice, but at last he simply *had* to speak it. The bush-man quelled his doubt at once.

"I reckon I've humbugged you some about them mountains," he said. "They ain't big. It's only me bein' 'customed to the flats judge height a bit different from you. They'll show up in the morning or soon after, never fear."

Just before the various members of the party lay down to rest, Bob drew attention to a bright star low down on the horizon.

"I don't remember seein' that chap before," he said. "What's his name, Stuart, old sport, an' you don't need to put me off by sayin' he's the blighter

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called Canopus, for I get him in the eye every morning."

But Stuart could not enlighten him, and was indeed more puzzled at the position of the luminary than his interrogator.

"Why, the dashed thing's blinkin' like a Morse code," complained Bob again, some minutes later, turning round in his blanket. "This campin' out stunt isn't what's it's cracked up to be. If the moon isn't shinin' on a fellow's face the bally stars come out an' wink at him."

Stuart raised his head. Where the star had been only the black void showed.

"Must have set mighty quick," he thought, and lay back to sleep.

The first sight that greeted his eyes on awakening was the dim outline of Tanami's mountain rising like a wraith from the desert. It might not then have been easily discernible had not the sun directly behind the obstruction shone through the jagged peaks. A feeling of joy mingled with awe came into his heart. Upon this lonely sentinel of the wilderness his dad had gazed in the years gone by, and now the son came where the father's foot had trod. This was the Notley's Land he had annexed for his own in the days far off yet so near—the days of his romantic hopes and dreamings. Now rosy fancies were behind with the years where they belonged, and grim facts alone stood out before his vision.

The bushman saw, and silently held out his hand

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to the boy. Undemonstrative always, it was his tribute to courage and achievement. The boy had not once faltered on the way; he had proved his worth, modestly seeking guidance from experience, strong of hope and sure of purpose as befitted the son of a pioneer.

The Mastodon crept along on the last lap of her journey, panting stertorously. Within a mile or so a decided change in the landscape came about. The unstable sands gave definite place to a loose conglomerate gravel, and a sprinkling of trees began to dot the plain. Here and there, too, ledges of solid rock broke the surface, showing cleavages in their form that looked like massive slabs on edge. A geologist would have understood these signs of remote volcanic upheaval, and, if curious, might have paused to examine the nature of the strata exposed; but such inspection could only have scientific interest, for even the possible presence of rare minerals in this inaccessible region would barely justify more than a passing glance.

"Jim Notley said the creek was a line of fracture," Tanami explained. "Somethin' had gone wrong wi' the works way back afore our time, an' somethin' sunk, or somethin' came up, darned if I know which."

They were steering some degrees north of the landmark they had seen, and which now loomed up distinctly. Nearer and nearer they drew, and yet no sign of any ancient watercourse could be traced. The meagre vegetation of course obscured the view, but it was abundantly evident that the mysterious

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channel did not proclaim its location afar off. A point was at length reached directly in line with the mountain; to go farther would leave it to the right, and behind. Here Stuart switched off the engine until the mystifying condition of affairs was fully considered.

"It's got me beat," the bushman said helplessly. "We scraped the mud outen the perishin' place wi' our hands, havin' no tools, an' we could see the mountain just as we see it from here. Mebbe the darn gully wasn't a real gully; we didn't have time to track it up one way or another."

"I'll soon know where it is," said Stuart. "Hand me the sextant, Bob."

"I think it's your rifle you'll want in a minute," returned the individual addressed. "I'm almost sure I saw a native as big as a church steeple lookin' at us from behind a tree."

The bushman glanced around searchingly.

"There ain't no protection here," he muttered, "an' these trees come so close up that the nigs could shelter behind them and spear us afore we'd notice. Swing her south and head for the mountain where it's more open, an' I'll prospect around on foot."

Stuart was less concerned now than the bushman. He knew that the creek, or whatever it might be, was not far away. The Mastodon went off on its new course with a prodigious snort; the engine was overheating and cried aloud for attention. The boy earnestly prayed that it would hold out just a little longer.

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However, no more than a quarter of a mile had been covered in the new direction before the Expedition came again to a halt, and this time the stoppage was enforced. The Mastodon without any warning suddenly sank into what appeared to be a soft and slimy soil, and the engine with a great dry gasp gave up the struggle.

The calamity lost much of its seriousness when it was realized that the tracks of the motor had laid bare the channel they sought, not defined, certainly, but assuredly the source or ending of a watercourse that bore evidence of moisture even on the surface. Ahead, a perceptible depression could now be traced, and looking back as they had come it was clear that the unusually prolific timber which Tanami had complained about was actually marking a zone of dampness emanating from a probable fissure far below.

"This explains why I didn't find the blinkin' place afore," Tanami said thoughtfully. "A creek that don't go nowhere but one place is a mighty hard proposition for an ignorant bushman to find. Anyway, we're here, an' I reckon the rest is easy. The place where Jim Notley an' me looked for water an' found only diamonds must be just a step farther along. Now we'll soon know—somethin'."

He proceeded to unpack the picks and shovels, saying no word meanwhile. The first business on hand was to find water, and at the spot where the diamonds had been unearthed he expected to do this speedily, and also the dismal proofs of his old

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companion's fate, which he now feared to see.

"You stay by the jigger, Stuart," he said, noticing that all three meant to accompany him. "Mebbe it is best that I should go without you first."

The boy shook his head.

"I am coming with you," he said quietly. "The engine will have to wait. We can't move the Mastodon now until I take off the cylinder head, and fix up the broken valve, and that's quite a long job. And there's just enough water in the tank to fill the radiator."

As there were Blacks about it was necessary that someone should remain with the motor if only to guard the stores it carried, and M'Crimmon promptly agreed to be left behind for this purpose.

"If ye hear me shootin' ye'll ken I'm engaging the enemy," he said, with much cheerfulness.

"An' if you hear us shootin'," returned the bushman, "lie low, an' they mightn't see you."

Armed with shovels, picks, and rifles the three set off. They had not far to go. In a few minutes' walk the slight concavity they were following abruptly opened out into a sharply defined channel with a rocky bank on one side and a sloping indeterminate conglomerate on the other. Sand and many up-jutting boulders filled the space between. It seemed to be but a frivolous freak of nature that the gully so formed should have existed at all, for a few hundred yards ahead it appeared not only to level up with the surface again, but to exist, if exist it did, under a wide capping stony ridge that led straight as an arrow to the low

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mountain range not more than a mile distant. Either a comparatively recent submergence had taken place, or a mighty Willy-Willy had at one time drained the gully of its sandy content at this one weak section, leaving the years to replace bit by bit the swift denudation it had wrought.

The bushman walked ahead, silent and glooming, his eyes roving over the bed of the dreary ravine, searching, searching. . . . At last, with a muttered exclamation, he stopped short. At his feet something metallic protruded; it was the spidery framework of a sextant, corroded with rust and almost as fragile as the web it resembled. He laid his rifle down and began to slash furiously with his pick at the surrounding sands, uncovering here and there odd remnants that his awakened memory recognized. Here had been thrown the discarded impedimenta of the original journey in which he had taken part. Only one other sure proof of the location was wanted, and Bob found it. Under the steep eastern bank of the creek he saw something white protrude, and shudderingly he drew it forth. At the sight Stuart groaned and turned away his head.

"'Tain't human, lad," said Tanami, examining the section of bone which Bob had revealed. "It's only a bit o' the old camel who thought he had come far enough."

But search as they might they could find no other indication of man's presence near at hand. It looked as if the creek had remained unvisited since first its

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solitudes were invaded by venturesome Jim Notley and his loyal companion.

"Where did the diamonds come from?" Stuart asked. To him the mystery of his father's fate was becoming more and more inexplicable.

The bushman nodded as if he had just remembered something.

"The little scoops we dug with our hands would soon silt up," he replied, "but I reckon that the same thing might happen wi' bigger holes."

He began to dig with feverish energy at a point where a small mound appeared to have collected, and almost after the first stroke or two his eyes gleamed with the light of certain knowledge. His pick had embedded in a powdery grey substance before the true level of the creek sand had been penetrated.

"It's a dump!" he exclaimed. "There's been a shaft sunk here, an' I reckon we'll find it."

With a will the boys rushed to help, and in a few minutes the covering gravel was shovelled aside, close to the spot where the evidence of excavation had been found. The clay underlying the drifts was soon revealed, and then all gazed in wonder at the sight of a rectangular shape which appeared on the cleared surface. It was the rim of a cavity which had been made by the hands of man; the cavity itself was filled with waste blown hither by the winds which had hastened to fill the void.

Tanami entered without a pause upon the task of clearing out the debris. In this neither of the boys

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could render assistance, for there was room for only one in the pit that quickly began to appear. He was standing waist-deep in the hole before he made any remark, and then, with a grim laugh, he tossed out a pebble he had picked from the side of the excavation.

"It's one o' them blinkin' diamonds," he said. "Don't see how they missed it."

Stuart picked up the stone, and with scarce a look handed it to Bob, who gazed at it with entranced interest.

"Gosh!" he murmured; "maybe this is worth a hundred golden gobbies, and you don't seem to mind."

"I ain't lookin' for that stuff just now, Bob," spoke Tanami, in the midst of his labours. "I reckon that if them things are val'able I could get enough to make you rich in half an hour. But it's water we want—an' here it is, thank God!"

It was rare for the bushman to express himself so fervently. He now straightened himself for the first time since he had begun the work of clearing out the cavity, and wiped the perspiration from his brow. The boys bent over and peered into the deepening pit. At Tanami's feet a pool of water was beginning to form, bubbling steadily up from unknown depths.

Stuart's relief at the welcome sight was beyond his power to express. Even then his main joy was in the thought that his dad's judgment had not been lacking in this. Unerringly he must have directed the sinking of the well—he might even have dug it with his own hands! Surely, the boy thought, a man of such great

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knowledge could not have fallen an easy prey to anyone.

Yet here was only deeper mystery. With water and wealth at hand he had disappeared, leaving no trace. Tanami joined him on the surface and interrupted his musings. He sensed the emotion that filled the boy's heart, and in his rough way tried to give comfort.

"Lots o' things could have happened, my lad," he said. "I reckon that so long as we don't find him there's hope. Can't say there's much, an' again there's no tellin'. So far's I can see they only got this here hole down afore—somethin' came along. It might have been nigs, but I hang on to my idea that the Dago is at the back o' everything. Don't grieve, boy, you've done all an' more than most grown men would do, an' don't despise the fortune that your dad would like you to take home to your poor worryin' mother."

The boy looked up with eyes that saw through a mist.

"Whatever is here is yours," he said brokenly. "You have done everything, and thought of everything—an' I couldn't take more from you."

Tanami regarded him, slightly perplexed. "You see, my lad, I'm only a poor sort o' groping beetle at the best. I ain't even eddicated. If I had lots o' money I'm darned if I'd know what to do with the stuff, and besides," as a new thought struck him, "I was only your dad's partner in this diamond business, an' I reckon his share should make his son rich. I don't want nothin', anyway, an' what I has is blinkin'

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well goin' home to Mrs. Jim—I mean your mother—an' there ain't a perishin' word more to say."

Stuart would have said a great deal more had not Bob interrupted at that moment with the hoarse warning that the natives were approaching in force. He had been looking for tinted pebbles in the bank of the creek, when he espied them. Now he came hurrying over to his companions, throwing open the breach of his rifle as he ran, to make sure that the magazine was fully charged.

"Keep down!" he whispered hoarsely, himself crouching almost double. "They were quite close when I spotted them, and they've got spears an' another sort of prodder that I've never seen before outside of a picture."

The bushman, with movement light as a cat, was over at the bank in an instant, where he surveyed the scene through a tuft of wiry grasses growing on the edge of the slope. He returned almost at once.

"You're quite kerect, young man," he said coolly. "I reckon I'll fill my pipe afore the circus starts. I doesn't get nearly so riled when I'm smokin'."

"I'd like to remember that," grumbled Bob, "but I'm too dashed nervous."

"If we've got to shoot," went on the bushman with exceeding calmness, "keep this in mind: aim low an' at the ground, a yard or so in front of their feet. The sand will bounce up in their eyes like buck-shot. There ain't no sense in killin' nigs if they ain't doin' nothin'——"

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"But dash it all," broke in Bob, his voice still at whisper pitch, "what if the blighters are out to kill us?"

"It's all in the day's work, lad." Which was the nearest Tanami could get to the "Kismet" of the East.

"Three cheers!" said Bob dismally, going back to his post of observation.

Now, in his career Tanami had had many brushes with natives, and with care he considered they could always be kept at bay, if not actually driven away, in the daytime. It was the night attack of a frenzied horde he feared, for then one could often be taken by surprise, and if once the Blacks got within spear-throw the situation would be desperate. In the present instance the Blacks were approaching in orderly formation and without haste, like a troop on parade, as the bushman expressed it. He had never known them attack in this way before.

"How far off now, Bob?" he asked, having got his pipe well alight by this time.

"About two hundred yards, and I don't like the look of them one little bit," replied the youth.

"Come on, Stuart," said Tanami. "This should be dead easy, for we've got good cover and the nigs ain't got any. You'll see 'em run like kangaroos in a minute."

Neither of the boys had had much experience with firearms, though both knew instinctively how to use them. Stuart's weapon was a service rifle

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which in his steady hand was deadly to anything aimed at within three hundred yards at least. Bob and Tanami each had a Winchester of 450 calibre which threw a bullet heavy enough to stop a buffalo. Unlike Bob, Stuart showed little trace of excitement. The presence of danger seemed to take away his power of speech, and quicken his brain to meet the emergency. The two ranged themselves one on either side of Tanami as he directed—and waited.

The advancing Blacks were apparently no nearer than they had been when first seen. Their march was taking them farther up towards the thicker timber where the Mastodon had briefly halted.

"I don't think the beggars have seen us at all," Bob said, not quite sure whether he was sorry or glad; "but I hope they won't spot the old 'bus."

"They can't miss it," jerked out Tanami shortly, "an' of course that's what they've come about. I reckon M'Crimmon will be up against it if I don't switch them off——"

The report of his rifle rang out with startling suddenness, and almost simultaneously a small geyser of gravelly fragments spouted up a short yard in front of the leading warrior, who wheeled around bewildered.

Another shot, and a fresh deluge of splintering debris showered up from the savage's feet. He leaped into the air this time, and the band pressing behind huddled together in confusion, uttering loud cries. Again the bushman fired, but to his amazement the Blacks, though obviously terrified, made no attempt

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to retreat. The tall native whom Tanami had singled out for his special attention had evidently recovered from his fright since he found himself undamaged, and with fierce exhortations he was now haranguing his followers.

"Do you think that's the end of the section?" asked Bob.

"Don't like it a bit, lad. Them's no ordinar' nigs. I reckon I'll have to plug that big chap to sorter encourage the rest. All together now, boys; we'll give 'em a volley for luck!"

Three rifles belched out as one, and the crash of exploding cordite awoke strange echoes in the creek and rolled over the plain in quivering waves of sound. Two of the Blacks fell, struggled back to their feet again, then sat down wonderingly in the midst of their brethren, their power of locomotion surprisingly gone, though they had seen no missile come towards them.

The warriors surged hither and thither in alarm, then clashing their spears against their shields they began to chant a wild war song, stamping their feet and swaying their bodies in unison to its strains. Tanami was perplexed. He had never known Blacks to behave in this fashion in broad daylight. He was also uncomfortably conscious that their articulation was markedly different from that of any of the tribes he had come in contact with. Their voices, harsh and clear, lacked the guttural timbre that should have been there.

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"Mebbe the Dago wasn't to blame after all," he muttered; then he glanced over the sights of his rifle once more, and he no longer aimed as he had directed his young companions. He shot to cripple if not to kill. He realized that the position had suddenly become fraught with grim possibilities.

He was right. Up to this point much of the band's terror had been of the superstitious variety. Out of the thunders calamity had come, and even the bravest trembled before that which he could not see. Now, however, the defenders of the creek could be observed. They had come into full view, seeking to force the issue by this show of strength. Three men with fire-spouting weapons might awe and put to flight a hundred aborigines, but these were not to be so easily cowed. With a wolfish roar they saw that this was the quarry they had come out to seek, and fiercely they swept to the attack.

Tanami, amazed, saw the rush begin, and now his eyes glared ceaselessly along his rifle barrel, and steadily he picked out one by one, so that the number advancing quickly became depleted. And the boys too, so suddenly to be tried in Fate's testing furnace, endured the ordeal like veterans, their courage shining forth like pure gold. Not once did they falter when the dread knowledge grew in their hearts that this might indeed be the end of all their hopes and all their strivings. Their rifles had become hot in their grasp when the first spear came. It had fallen short, but the momentum had carried it on along

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the ground. It rustled to their feet like a snake.

"Back into the gully," cried Tanami. "We may beat them yet."

Vain hope! Though nearly half the number of the attacking band had been put out of action, about a dozen effective warriors were left in the culminating rush at close quarters.

The trio retreated from the bulwark of the bank as the foremost savage reached it. The magazines of their rifles were empty; it was useless trying to re-charge when in a moment their fate would be sealed. They stood there at bay, the lean bushman, in whose eyes gleamed a desperate light, holding aloft his rifle clubbed to strike, and two boys with powder-begrimed faces who resolutely followed his example.

There seemed to come a lull in which no one moved or spoke. The warriors now lined the bank, and in front and a little ahead was the tall savage whom Tanami had early noted as the leader. In his hand he poised a shortened spear like the javelin of ancient days, but this he made no attempt to throw. In the breathing space so strangely afforded, Stuart had time to reflect that the natives had thrown but few spears in all, despite the heavy losses they endured. He noticed that each man had still a goodly share of the deadly barbed missiles slung over his shoulder, and all were also armed with a short pointed weapon similar to that held by their leader. Calmly his gaze rested on the sombre faces, not all of which were cast in savage mould. Only a few were fierce in expression;

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the others had in their staring eyes the wondering look of children. They had more the appearance of Arabs than of aborigines. This much Stuart noted in the brief space while the wonderful silence remained unbroken.

Quick as a flash came a change. Into the air there burst a series of mighty reverberations that quickly ascended in scale to a tumultuous roar. It was the Mastodon, with life incredibly renewed, hastening to the rescue! The spell was broken. For a fleeting second the bushman's eyes wavered, and in that second his enemy leaped. The weapon he might in safety have hurled dropped discarded from his grip and his long arms stretched out and encircled Tanami's throat. The issue of this single challenge, if such it was, would not have remained long in doubt. The bushman dropped his rifle, and, with a grunt, locked his adversary's oily waist within a grip of steel, bending the writhing body backwards with such fierceness that a scream of pain broke from the lips of the savage. But at the heels of their chief his followers came; a wave of black humanity descended upon the struggling pair, and in a moment the boys too were surrounded and overwhelmed.

By this time it had become clear to all three that for some extraordinary reason or other the savages meant to take them alive. Talking excitedly among themselves they rapidly bound their captives with thongs, and keeping them in their midst began to hasten southward along the creek. Behind them came the thing

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that they dreaded; a flashing monster whose glittering scales spurned the ground, whose voice was as the voice of doom. Affrighted, they looked back and saw the shining terror approaching, and then they hurried the more.

Twisting in his captor's grasp, Bob managed to look round, and his old self, which he thought for ever dead, revived electrically within him.

"Gosh!" he chuckled loudly, "M'Crimmon's got the old 'bus on our trail an' drivin' her like billy-o! His ugly face behind the wheel is like the ghost of Nemesis. We're safe, Stuart, old top. Rescued by the Mastodon! That sounds glorious!"

His fellow captives answered him with a shout of encouragement. They were not accepting their involuntary mode of progression with the same good grace as their cheerful companion in misfortune. Tanami's object in resisting so vigorously was simply to involve the attention of as many of the natives as possible, so that perhaps the boys might get a chance of escape. Stuart had adopted similar tactics for a reason that had quickly appeared to him. In the path of their reluctant march the creek was entering into a rocky cul-de-sac which would prove an effective barrier to the Mastodon. M'Crimmon behind could not see this danger, and might find himself in a position with retreat and advance both cut off if he were not warned in time. Therefore the boy struggled wildly, dimly hoping that the natives would be overtaken and put to flight before this natural obstacle was reached.

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The roar of the racing engine, mingling with the confused cries of the Blacks, created a din indescribable, but so close was M'Crimmon now upon them that his voice could be heard above the pandemonium, raised in fierce invective. Tanami with a powerful effort wrestled clear for a moment and swung around. The giant motor was less than fifty yards in the rear. He had a fleeting glimpse of its occupant, stern and purposeful, tugging at the gear lever.

"Danger!" he bellowed. "Get on the bank."

This was all he could say before he was again overwhelmed by grasping hands. Despite their terror the savages were evidently determined to hold their prisoners at all costs. Stuart tried to shout a further warning, but M'Crimmon had by this time seen for himself. A hoarse yell of disappointment issued from his lips. Then came a pause in the pursuit, and a number of bullets whistled overhead. M'Crimmon's shooting was not his strong point, and his excitement did not tend to improve it. Luckily he realized this in time, for friend and foe were so bunched together that only the numerical predominance of the latter would have favoured a lucky hit.

Stuart recognized by the new note of the Mastodon that it was being forced at the creek bank under a full throttle; in a minute or two more M'Crimmon would be able to bring the terrifying monster ahead. He had little fear of the result. He imagined that the three prisoners would be promptly deserted while the Blacks sought safety in flight. Bob's belief in such a satis-

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factory happening had already grown into a certitude, which he expressed aloud with great glee. An unpleasant possibility quickly flashed across his mind and damped his enthusiasm somewhat.

"They may prod us with the prickers they carry before clearing out," he said, for Stuart's sympathetic ear.

They approached the point where the creek seemed to end in an uprising mass of rocks and boulders. Already they could hear the Mastodon panting along the ridge above. In another moment it would be facing them as they climbed, and from his vantage point on top M'Crimmon would be sure to have some surprise in store. Bob could visualize him waging homeric combat with the warriors as they came, to the accompaniment of the Mastodon's mighty music, and but for the disturbing fear that had entered his heart a little before, his soul would have gloried in the prospect.

A few yards from the base of the ridge that terminated the career of the channel, the warriors halted and held hurried conference. The tall leader of the band, who had ventured to try conclusions with Tanami, spoke volubly to his associates, pointing backwards to where the wounded had fallen, some of whom were screeching lustily. Stuart thought that now, the evil spirit they feared being no longer visible, they were arranging for some of their number to return and bring the stragglers in. Whether he had guessed rightly or not he was not then to know, for the prisoners

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were now urged in front, and with gestures told to advance.

"Gosh!" cried Bob. "They're lettin' us go. Frightened to face the music on top. Hoorah!"

His arms were still bound, however, so he stepped forward with caution. Stuart and Tanami followed, the latter expecting every moment that each one would be speared in the back as he made the slight ascent. At the base of the stony mound they thought to climb the creviced rock shone white and polished as if with much traffic of feet. Above, they heard M'Crimmon's eager shout, and his absurdly red head appeared thrust from behind a boulder on the ridge, where he cautiously sheltered from possible spear attack.

They stepped upon the glistening rock in their passage to join him, and immediately their foothold began to subside. It rocked downwards with a deliberate and ponderous movement as if they had stood on a delicately balanced sphere and caused it to rotate. In another instant they were precipitated into a cavernous void and the light of day was no more seen.

CHAPTER VIII

The Region of Twilight

The extraordinary happening came about with such startling suddenness that the swing of the massive platform had ceased before any of the three could even dimly realize what was taking place. A surprised "Gosh!" from Bob as they were tilted into the depths was the only sound uttered. They slithered rather than fell from their sloping foothold, and rolled promiscuously down a continuing declivity that ended abruptly against a damp rocky floor of unknown dimensions. They raised themselves to a sitting posture, and gave vent to their feelings.

"If they wanted to kill us," Stuart said hopefully, "they didn't need to go to all this trouble."

Tanami, unseen though near at hand, agreed with philosophical cheerfulness.

"If I can get my blinkin' hands free," he muttered, "I'll be able to guess what sort o' caboose we're in."

The boys heard him roll about on the rocky surface, straining at the things that encircled him. After a while he spoke again.

"No nig should know how to tie them sort o' knots. 'Tain't reasonable an' 'tain't right, but them's

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the funniest nigs I've ever seen. They've got a sight more savvy than lots o' white men I know. Ah!——"

He had found a sharp ledge against which his bonds, by repeated chafings, would become severed, and with many grunts he continued to writhe about in the darkness to accomplish his purpose.

The boys talked together in whispers, fearing to move lest some yawning chasm might lie beside them. Their thoughts were gloomy, even despairing, for no avenue of escape seemed possible now, and they tried to resign themselves to the worst. Tanami, hearing them, groaned in spirit, and laboured the more to free himself, lacerating his bound wrists cruelly in contact with the edged rock. Gradually the darkness seemed to lessen; the walls of their prison took indefinite shape and they were able to distinguish one another in a vague and shadowy light. And yet no change was actually occurring. It was simply that their eyes were accustoming themselves to their new surroundings. The cavern which at first they considered dark as the blackness of night had in truth never been dark at all. The transition from the glare of sunlight to the gloom of this pit had merely caused a temporary blindness which was slowly passing away. They could even see in sketchy outline the rough passage through which they had descended. Their prison was in reality no prison in the restricted sense, for ahead a spacious corridor could be traced sloping downwards into the haze of distance.

Tanami, having at last freed himself, performed the

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same service for the boys with the aid of his pocket-knife; then he stood up with a great sigh of relief.

"There ain't such a mystery 'bout this tomfool business as I thought," he said. "The whole blinkin' place is limestone formation, an' I never knew. Didn't look like the stuff to me, on the outside. I reckon we'll find a way out somewhere."

"But does that explain the trap-door stunt?" asked Bob, failing to understand what difference any rock should make so long as it enclosed them.

"It does, Bob; limestone ain't very hard, an' it frets into the rummiest o' shapes sometimes. I've seen a chunk o' it mebbe a hundred tons or more in weight balancing like an egg, so's a man could make it wobble like them toy things that won't stay down even when ye slog them. An' as for caves, I've seen 'em around Chillagoe way in Queensland so's you could walk for a blinkin' mile from one to t'other an' never see the sun."

"Hang it! I'm sure that's the old 'bus I hear outside," Bob exclaimed. A dull droning echo had intruded upon their senses. It seemed to issue from far overhead.

"M'Crimmon will stand by," Stuart said with confidence. "It's up to us to get out of this as quick as we can, or he'll waste all the petrol in the tank."

They examined every corner and crevice near at hand, and tried to move the massive slab which had provided the means of entrance to their underground

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quarters; but their united efforts could make little impression upon it in an upward direction, and the damp and slimy under-surface offered no grip for a vertical pull.

Yet it was obvious that the half-light which filtered into the cavern must have some connexion with the outside world. Stuart made several efforts to climb the slippery walls so that he might investigate, but the stalactites and tendrils that he clutched at for support broke away in his grasp at each attempt, and he failed to get near the top. Still, he could see pin-points of illumination which communicated through tiny crevices in the parquetry of glistening boulders forming the roof. The light, indeed, percolated from the loose edges of the stony ridge which to their seeming had displaced the creek.

Tanami did not imagine that the natives would leave them long to their own devices, and a desperate scheme had half formed in his mind to lie in wait by the sliding rock and grapple with them as they came. Possibly only their leader might appear, thinking the captives bound and helpless, and then he would find the tables turned and be forced to show a way of escape if he would save his own life. The bushman did not speak of his plan, but the boys saw him grope about looking for a weapon, and they divined his purpose. He dropped the flint-edged fragment he had picked up, with a stifled groan.

"I reckon I'd do more harm than good. If I messed the job up, they'd finish us right away. Come on, my

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lads! We'll see how far we can follow this tunnel afore we take the last chance."

They moved forward cautiously and in single file; bats whirred about their ears, and dim-seen creatures, that looked like giant lizards, scurried in their path. The white walls on either side dripped with ooze, and the air became clammy and heavy.

After the scorching heat to which they had been accustomed, the boys felt the extraordinary coolness they were experiencing as if it were a chilling frost.

As they proceeded on their hesitating course, the width of the natural passage they followed increased, and the dome above grew farther and farther distant. They had gone but a hundred yards or so when Tanami in front halted. To all appearance the way was leading into the bowels of the earth, whence now came a faint muffled sound like the far-away muttering of thunder.

"God knows where we're headin' for," said the bushman. "I don't like that confounded row, an' I don't like gettin' too far away from the surface."

"I don't think there's any active volcano in Australia," commented Stuart. "That rumbling noise we hear may be just echoes."

"I hope it isn't a blessed earthquake," murmured Bob. "I've had all the excitement I want for a quiet day."

They resumed their march. The rushing wind that now met them in the face surely denoted an exit

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somewhere into the free air of heaven, though how such opening could come about so far below the surface none of them could think. This time they had made only a few steps when a further disturbing element made its presence felt. It started seemingly quite close in front as a long dismal wail, eerie and unutterably melancholy, enough in itself to send fear to the stoutest heart. Before the single long-drawn note had ended, a wild chorus of similar yells broke out, piercing in their shrillness, and trailing off into mournful cadence.

The boys leaned against the dripping wall, breathing heavily. What horror was this that waited their coming? Unarmed, they were helpless against attack whether by man or beast. The din continued, attaining a new pitch in which fury was dominant, and into it were blended snarls and deep-throated bellowings and the clashing of fangs.

Tanami listened for a full minute without speaking. He was trying to distinguish between the different sounds that assailed his ears.

"Dingoes!" he said, "and somethin' else that I can't make out, big as a buffalo by the sound he makes. I thought it was mighty strange for the niggers to leave the trail clear for us, but they weren't taking any risks, darn them."

"I thought a dingo wouldn't attack a man," Bob suggested, seeking for a gleam of hope.

"Not singly, Bob, but in the pack they're a different proposition. And when they're kept hungry as well,

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they ain't healthy things to meet. They are just wolves, lad."

The bushman was becoming deeply perplexed. The presence of animals here was sure proof that some outlet existed, and it was also nearly sure proof that the native population actually *lived* in these subterranean galleries, for invariably these desert races and their animal following find shelter under the same roof.

"Unless the beggars mean to starve us to death, I suppose some of them will come along to see how we are getting on," Stuart hazarded. "You see," he added as an afterthought, "I don't believe they'd have saved us up just for fun."

"I reckon we'll get back," grunted Tanami. "M'Crimmon saw where we disappeared, an' I somehow think he's the sort o' man that'll open that sliding door for ever wi' dynamite if the nigs give him a chance."

"I'm dashed if I thought of that," reflected Bob, cheering up instantly. "Of course that's just what the reckless blighter will do."

Thus brightened by a forlorn hope, they started to retrace their steps just as the howls and shrieks they were leaving behind died down to a sullen murmur of animal rage. They did not hear the soft pattering of bare feet behind.

Had they hesitated a little longer they might have seen six warriors emerge from the area of discord and come in their direction. But it was better that

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they did not see. Resistance to recapture would have been futile. The natives following drew close, their bare feet making no sound. They overtook the downcast three and formed in a circle round them, uttering never a syllable yet conveying in their emotionless countenances a sense of finality that could not be misunderstood. Among them was the tall savage who had led the relentless attack earlier in the day, and it was he again who took charge of operations. He peered closely at the prisoners, noticing now if he had not before that they were no longer bound, and his lips parted in a wide grin. "No-good," he said, slowly but quite clearly, and shook his head.

The boys were wildly startled to hear coherent and familiar words coming from such a source, and Tanami bent forward as if electrified.

"You ain't a real nig," he cried. "None o' ye is real nigs, though your hides are the same."

It was plain, however, that the warrior realized nothing of what was spoken. He gave some rapid directions to his associates, who were about to bind the captives once more, and they desisted with obvious reluctance. His English vocabulary, not quite exhausted, came further into service:

"Me—Ibrahim. Come!"

As he with difficulty formed the words, he changed the short spear he carried to his left hand, holding up the right with palm open. He kept it thus for the space of several seconds then brought it down lightly

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on Bob's shoulder. The youth shivered at the touch, but recovered himself instantly.

"Go on. I'm the mug," he said.

Ibrahim, saying no more, began to stride along the ghostly corridor, still keeping in close contact with Bob. Tanami and Stuart followed close behind. Five savages brought up the rear, beating their shields with their waddies in rhythmic time, heightening the impression in the minds of the luckless three that they were being led to ceremonial sacrifice—for they marched towards the region of weird alarm and knew nothing of their destined fate.

Yet Tanami talked cheerily on the way. He explained the significance of the *savage's* action in transferring his weapon so ostentatiously from his right hand to his left. It was a sign that for the time being at least no danger need be feared from him. Even this much was encouraging, and the boys made the most of it. Luckily for their peace of mind they did not know anything of the customs of primitive black races. They had heard stories of African tribes which were of course pure fiction, and more romantic than fearful. Their experiences, they thought, might be terrifying enough while they lasted, but youth, always resilient, could take little count of the reckoning. In the heat of battle they had expected the worst, but in cold blood their hopeful reasoning could not conceive final disaster, even though they discussed the possibility in all apparent seriousness.

They came to the zone of ominous sounds, which

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now seemed strangely silent, but not for long. All at once pandemonium broke loose louder and more terrible than before, and into the heart of it Ibrahim strode with apparent unconcern. The gallery, which had been ever widening, here bellied out to form a nearly circular chamber, and it was alive with struggling shapes that issued from the gloomiest recesses and streamed towards the centre in a swaying, pulsating mass. Glistening fangs formed a line on either side, and slavering jaws drooled in fierce expectancy. The nerve-shattering howlings ceased. The creatures were dingoes, as Tanami had said, but dingoes such as even he had never seen before. They were large as wolf-hounds, and of a ferocity scarcely imaginable.

The boys drew back, but their savage guide pointed to the tautened cords that held each animal to an unseen stake, and they passed safely through the wolfish lane, and made entry into a smaller gallery that lay in their path. Behind now came the angry mouthings of hungry beasts deprived of their prey, and looking back Stuart saw the remainder of their escort move among the frenzied brutes with impunity.

"I'm dashed glad that's over," Bob said fervently, and no sooner had he spoken than he halted suddenly in his tracks and clutched Stuart's arm.

"Look!" he whispered, pointing into the gloom on his right.

Ibrahim now showed impatience and even fear. Plainly he did not wish to hesitate at this particular place. He shouted a string of unintelligible words

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accompanied by much shaking of the head. Yet in the brief stoppage Stuart saw what Bob's keen eyes had already perceived—a monstrous shape that sprawled half-erect in the more distant shadows, its great green eyes blazing with phosphorescent flame.

“Seems like a blinkin’ menagerie we’ve struck,” Tanami grunted, “but it ain’t no good bein’ surprised. That blamed thing was a bit like a croc an’ it ’peared to slither like a seal. Anyways, it stinks mighty powerful.”

A rank musky odour filled the air. The thing emitted a deep throaty bellow as they hurried on.

The muttering thunder note they had first heard in the absence of other sounds now assailed their ears with an increased intensity. It was no longer a vague rumbling but rather the definite drumming of some mighty power under restraint, and mingling with it came a sharp whispering echo such as flood waters make. The idea became firmly established in Stuart's mind that they must be approaching an active volcanic fissure, for how other could the strange noises be explained? Escaping steam and bubbling lava might easily make a similar disturbance, and his own father, according to Tanami, had stated that the mysterious creek was just a “line of weakness”. The boy did not know exactly what this term meant, but he had heard it used in connexion with earthquakes, and a volcano, he reasoned, was much the same thing on a smaller scale.

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Tanami shook his head, but would venture no other opinion.

"Your dad said that the volcanoes in Ostralya have been dead for thousands of years," he muttered, "but I ain't goin' to be surprised at anything that comes along after this."

The native had now relinquished his grip of Bob's shoulder, and was walking a few paces ahead. Since Bob had stopped to gaze at the fantastic creature with the blazing eyes Ibrahim had appeared to become sullen and even nervous. Often he turned to issue harsh instructions to the armed warriors who still kept up a faint tattoo with their shields and clubs, and each time they would draw nearer. Evidently a close watch was being kept on the captives, though no reason for this was clear.

And whither were they bound? This question beat at the hearts of the boys, who expected at most but a brief journey which would lead them on to welcome daylight. The drumming chord with its hissing accompaniment became more diffused, and the blast of air that drove into their faces lessened. The crystal corridor in which they walked was opening out into gigantic proportions, and suddenly they looked upon a spectacle so extraordinary that though the eyes saw the brain would scarce believe.

Almost at their feet there swirled a mighty cauldron in the centre of which a dense turmoil of waters belched for fully twenty feet above the surface before disintegrating in a sweeping cascade that descended back

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upon the pool in a smother of foam. The whole was set in a gleaming amphitheatre pillared by giant stalagmites and spanned by a high arched roof that shone like purest marble. This was not all. Beyond, and extending into the dim near distance, a broad and placid river flowed through caverns and crevices of wonderful beauty whose structure was white as driven snow.

And yet again came further surprise, for life was here. In the innumerable alcoves which honeycombed the rocks on the lower side of the pool whole families seemed to have their habitation. Groups of natives could be seen patrolling the river's edge with fish spears in their hands; others squatted apart apparently engaged in domestic pursuits; and some were fashioning weapons of the chase. Spellbound, the three gazed at the scene, forgetting for the time their doubts and fears, knowing only that they saw before them a sight grand as had ever greeted the eyes of any explorer.

"Water!" gasped Tanami at length. "Oceans o' it, an' a river that could *never* dry up. I'm—I'm jiggered!"

"An underground city! Marble palaces for natives to live in. Gosh!" So exclaimed Bob, seeing matters from another aspect.

"A subterranean river, forced up by pressure from somewhere," thought Stuart. "I wonder where it comes from, and if it ever gets to the surface?"

So much they saw, and yet their time for seeing was brief. Ibrahim was beside them, gloomy and impatient;

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the guard was pressing uncomfortably behind. Still farther they had to go! And what then? The swarthy native pointed onward, and they followed.

They skirted the edge of the circling flood, watching the depths curiously as they went. Here and there a dark object appeared above the surface and floated around with the current. Watching one of these, Bob saw it split in twain into a yawning mouth.

"Crocs, Bob!" said Tanami; "the place must be full of 'em."

"Don't like the look of them much," answered the lad. "I'm dashed if I'd care to go swimmin' anywhere about here."

Stuart's main interest was in the central upheaving torrent. It fascinated him. He found himself wondering from what depth it was being forced. As he looked he thought he saw a bulbous shape appear beneath the spray, but it vanished before he could be sure. He glanced again, and the shock he got made him stumble on the shelving rocks, and he would have slipped into the pool had not Tanami's saving clutch been there in time. Photographed in his mind was the picture of an ungainly thing with an enormous frog-like head and scaly body, its after part submerged. It might have been a species of crocodile, but he thought it looked like nothing in the world that he had ever seen or read about. He noticed that Ibrahim kept his head averted from the pool, and marvelled why.

But nothing could escape Bob. He, too, had seen.

"Gosh!" he said. "I should just hate to have that

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cheery chap at the end of a fishing line. He's the same sort o' joker we saw in the cave near the dingoes. Mebbe the natives think he's just *it!*"

Along the rocky edge of the river they went, where the vast limestone caverns formed the abode of the strange tribe. The light was in some places quite bright, but there were areas, too, of darkest gloom, particularly where the river narrowed in deep-cleft channels, and the trellised roof descended so close that it could almost be touched.

The natives they passed on the way eyed them with sullen resentment but did not come near, for which all three were thankful. Evidently the bulk of them were not of naturally ferocious disposition. Tanami's mind was in a hopeless maze.

"Them nigs ain't real nigs," he kept on repeating to himself. "Not a blinkin' one of them has got the nig's flat nose, an' they don't use the lingo neither. No, them ain't nigs or I'll eat my hat."

Ibrahim halted at length where the flowing waters broadened into a wide lagoon, interrupted by many masses of the solid formation, which here ascended like the piers of some enormous bridge. The damp glistening walls beside them were penetrated by many great openings which appeared to rise upward into a region of greater brightness. He led the way into one of these with a gesture of finality.

With hearts beating high with hope the boys followed. They were going up at last; up towards the light of heaven. Tanami thought he saw his

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chance. He could have disarmed Ibrahim in a trice, and hurled him backward against his fellows. He turned deliberately to estimate the fighting value of the five.

"I believe we could do it, lads," he whispered, "only I don't like to deceive even a nig—though he ain't. He trusted us, which is mighty strange—No, I reckon I can't do it after all. God help me if I'm makin' a mistake."

The natural stone pathway, hollowed into traceable steps by the multitudinous feet that must have passed, zigzagged like the stairway of a gigantic building, and quite suddenly it emerged on a flat floorway.

Involuntarily an exclamation of surprise burst from the boys' lips. The floorway showed the cunning hand of man in its construction. It was tessellated and ground to an even smoothness. It led the way to a spacious hall which bore evidence of having been hewn to conformity with a design, and abutting on this on either side were many entrances into the solid rock denoted by swinging grass-like curtains which took the place of doors. Nature and her works were here, but human handiwork had also wrought its spell, transforming a cavern into a structure almost of refinement. Rugs of woven grasses covered the flagged surface at intervals, and in the centre a rough-carved symbolical figure stretched out a supplicating hand.

The aspect presented was Oriental; it showed no trace of savagery.

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Bob gave a huge sigh of relief, and confidence immediately displaced the foreboding torment that had filled his breast. In the exuberance of his spirits he smote Ibrahim's bare shoulders heartily.

"What ho! old buck!" he cried. "This isn't too dusty after that chamber of horrors downstairs."

The warrior did not even turn his head, but marched straight on. A curtain swung outwards from what seemed like the main doorway on the left, and a native armed with many spears came forth. He eyed the captives so fiercely that Bob's growing enthusiasm underwent a speedy process of revulsion. A moment more, and the trio were thrust into the room which he had just vacated, and with a rustling and clattering of weapons the warrior guard, with Ibrahim at their head, stationed themselves at the entry.

The first impression received by the boys was that of intense light. Coming from partial gloom their vision was suddenly blinded, and they thought for a moment that they stood now in the full glare of the sun. But the change was far from being so drastic, and quickly their eyes adjusted themselves to their altered prospects. The chamber in which they found themselves was large, and devoid of any form of furnishing save for sundry mats that strewed the floor. The walls were carved with hieroglyphics, some so dim that they appeared only as vague markings in the marble, but others were chiselled deep as if they had but recently been created. In a corner was a pile of yellow rolled packages that looked like ancient



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parchments, and in the centre of the room a skin-like sheet on which some unfinished writing was clearly visible was flattened out.

But of human presence there was no sign, and having realized this, Tanami approached the aperture whence the light came and looked beyond. To his surprise he saw the arid plains shimmering into the distance, and he had thought he was still below the surface. He called to the boys to come over, and treading silently they obeyed. They saw the westering sun yet high in the sky, and a gasp of joy issued from their lips. The "window" was but a movable block of stone, which at a touch swung wide, allowing ample room for a man to pass. The same thought had come to each of them, but it was vain. Craning his neck, the bushman sought to see what lay immediately below, and a glance was sufficient. He withdrew his head and gazed sorrowfully at his companions.

"We're inside the blisterin' mountain," he said, "an' there's a sheer drop o' a hundred feet outside. I'll be eternally jiggered if I can make out how we came here. An' I reckon it's goin' to be mighty hard gettin' out.

The boys did not take matters so seriously. They had not received rough usage at the hands of their captors and cheerfully expected that their strange adventure would soon end by their all being set free. Something in the far distance caught Stuart's eye—a cloud of sand and no more.

"It's the Mastodon!" he cried.

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He did not care to add what he thought, that M'Crimmon, considering his comrades must certainly be killed, was leaving the scene of disaster with all speed.

"The nigs are chasing him," said Tanami. "I hope they don't get him in a soft patch. I reckon M'Crimmon will stand by——"

A startled "Gosh!" from Bob interrupted him. From an unnoticed alcove near, a frail old man in flowing robes had noiselessly appeared. Bob was gazing at him with bulging eyes and mouth agape.

Tanami gave an inarticulate grunt, and Stuart stared at the figure as if it were something unreal which would quickly vanish away. He had seen such a picture in books dealing with ages long past. The venerable man who stood before them looked the typical patriarch of the olden days, when the known world was small and tribesmen tended their flocks and herds. Yet clearly the aged one held supreme authority here. His unfaltering gaze dwelt searchingly upon the three, then he motioned them abruptly to withdraw from the window, at the same time seating himself cross-legged upon the floor, and beside the uncompleted parchment. Slowly the boys drew near to him, but Tanami passed them in a stride, and the floodgates of his speech were opened in a wild outpouring of mingled invective and command.

"You ain't a nig, you hoary-headed old heathen!" he cried savagely; "and what have ye done with my

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mate? If you've killed him, may I be pole-axed if I don't throttle you right now."

From without, Ibrahim's voice was raised in loud alarm, and immediately he and his warriors pressed inwards with spears poised ready to strike. The old man had not stirred. His eyes held the bushman, and in them was no trace of fear. Impatiently he waved the warriors to be gone, and then he spoke in a slow halting voice, as if he were striving to find words in an unknown tongue.

"I know not what thou speakest, but I read that which is within thy heart. My time is not yet come, and mortal threats are naught to one grown old who would welcome the end of his earthly span. Yet in thy thoughts there is the cry for justice; and my law is just. Therefore remain content, for surely knowledge will be given thee if thou art fitted to receive it. But thou art come to me to be judged and not to give judgment. Wherein have my people molested thee, that thou and the youths should seek to slay them? Wherefore expect from these of my humble race treatment other than thou wouldst mete out to them?"

Stuart interposed eagerly:

"We didn't shoot to kill. They attacked us. We thought they were savages, but we know now we were wrong."

The Patriarch was silent for a space. When he answered, the words seemed to come in a voice that was far away.

"In thy heart is truth which redeemeth all things;

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there is hope without which no man liveth; yet also I see doubt and fear which are as stinging nettles in the garden of youth. Cast them out. Be not afraid. Life's little round is but a breath——”

“Here, hold on!” cried Bob, seizing upon the last sentence, sensing some sinister meaning therein. “It's all very well for you, who have had a dashed good innings in this merry little spot, but have a heart, old sport. Stuart an' me are only beginning——”

The seer turned a piercing glance upon the lad, and in expressionless monotone made reply:

“An unruly tongue is in thy mouth, but that which men call honesty is within thy heart. Courage too is thy portion, and loyalty even to the death.”

He held his peace for fully a minute, and when his lips gave sound once more the words came feebly. His shrivelled hawk-like face, since first he had answered Tanami's vehement tirade, seemed to have shrunken and the aged head bowed wearily. He addressed Tanami again:

“My warriors would have torn thee limb from limb had they dared, but my power controls their wayward desires where my wisdom fails. Still, they chafe at my guiding hand, and though I would spare, our laws demand fulfilment as it is written on the tablets of our history. A life for a life, yes; though it be of one of the favoured people, it shall not outweigh the black man's life in the balance of justice. Ten of my chosen warriors lie sore stricken, and mayhap some shall die. If so be they live, then shall no cause be held against thee, save

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that thy life must endure within these shadows. If they die—the law is just. Now I grow tired with the effort of strange speech, for the words fashion in my mouth through much study of secret lore, though I know not the language that they speak. Here in this twilight land where even I am king, a wise man tarrieth for the little while of his earthly sojourn. Him would I have instructed to detail to thee much that I have spoken, but it is not fitting that he should be called until a further time.”

He continued to talk, but it was in a language unknown to his listeners, whom he did not now appear to see.

Suddenly he recollected himself, and looking around in surprise he then clapped his hands twice. Ibrahim entered, and to him the Patriarch spoke at length.

“Gosh!” whispered Bob. “I’m dashed hungry, an’ I didn’t notice it before. I suppose Jimmy with the spear will get us something to eat soon—an’ I do hope they don’t keep bardies in this giddy little city.”

Ibrahim signed to the three to follow, and led the way to the curtained egress. Stuart, looking back at the last moment, saw that the old man lay fast asleep beside his parchment. Outside, Ibrahim disbanded the guard, and this action cheered Bob mightily, and even Tanami showed an awakened interest in his surroundings. All hoped that this time their pilgrimage would be brief, and in this at least their wish was promptly gratified. They were shown into a wide chamber on the farther side of the courtyard, and

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informed by many gestures that here in future they were to abide.

"But what about food, Sunny Jim?" inquired Bob with much earnestness, opening his mouth like a gaping fish and compressing his waist-line prodigiously, so that he might be understood.

Ibrahim grinned in the friendliest manner, and made a surprising flight into English:

"White man—hims hungree fella. Yes—by dash. Loon-den—Eedboro—Seed-nee. Ibrahim good chap. Bally heathen—come quick. Hur-ree—Hur-ree."

Having come to the end of his repertoire, he vanished.

"Hoorah!" cried Bob, cheering him on his way.

CHAPTER IX

A Vision in the Night

It is generally understood that truth can be stranger than any fiction, yet when extraordinary realities appear in an atmosphere of romance they are seldom appreciated at their full value by those directly involved. Truth can be rather grim at times when it plays its part away from the humdrum routine of ordinary life, and no matter how great may be the glamour surrounding it, the central fact persists, and stubbornly obtrudes its presence. Refusing to be brushed aside like a cobweb created by fancy, it stalks around, a skeleton at the feast of illusion, a goblin at a fairy dance.

In some such way as this the boys viewed the position in which they found themselves, while Tanami chewed the cud of reflection and found it bitter as gall. On his shoulders lay the blame for all that had happened. He had not taken proper precautions, he had under-estimated the forces arrayed against him, and last of all he had neglected to realize until too late that these Blacks were different from all others he had ever seen. That the result would not have been affected in any case, he did not pause to think. All that he could see clearly was that he had failed in a trust he would

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have given his life to guard. The underground caverns which housed a weird people, the mysterious sunken river, and the uncanny old image who lived within a rock—all would have been interesting enough to tell the outside world, but the conviction was strong within him that he would never leave this place alive. Still, there was much to think of meanwhile. The wily old man had surprisingly understood and answered his demand for knowledge of Jim Notley's fate, but the reply was evasive and unsatisfactory.

"The flamin' old idol could speak straight enough when he promised to murder me," he mused bitterly. "I reckon he meant it too, the croaking son o' a gun. I'll have to look round quick an' lively afore he comes after me wi' his tomahawk."

The boys were seated on the floor of the room discussing the events of the day in whispers. The bushman stood moodily by the rock-framed opening which served as a window. He could see no sign of the Mastodon out there in the desert, and had sadly come to the conclusion that M'Crimmon had probably been captured or slain.

Ibrahim had tended to them well. He had brought such food as they had never expected to see—fish in abundance, meat of a rank and musty flavour, and a mess of some kind of grain which had a starchy and slightly acrid taste. He had also given them to understand by much dumb show and head-shakings that they were still in a position of great danger. He emphasized his meaning by making a very fierce face.

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and pointing below. Apparently he wished them to understand that the tribesmen were very angry indeed, and they accepted the information without in any way realizing its seriousness.

By this time it was nearly sundown, and the region by the river beneath them was sure to be in total darkness. Stuart had an idea that by following the strange waterway in its course, a point must surely come where it would debouch upon the plain. Here would be a way of escape even if they had to trust themselves to the flood and swim with it until daylight was reached.

"I noticed that none of the natives went any nearer to the water than they could help," he said, "and I think even if they saw us plunge in they would be frightened to follow."

"I'm dashed if I'd blame them," Bob muttered. "I'm not a bit frightened. Oh no! But there are some things floatin' around in that particular ditch that make me shiver all the same. Gosh! those green-eyed johnnies give me the creeps!"

Tanami closed the conversation at this juncture. He had seen a scraggy sandalled foot protrude beneath the curtain forming the door.

"I reckon we're goin' to be mighty comfortable here," he declaimed loudly.

The boys glanced at him in alarm.

"But I'm a blisterin' liar!" he added in an undertone.

A slight sound came from outside, as if someone

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was gently stealing away. Then they understood.

"If Methuselah can read what we think, 'tain't no good tellin' him out loud," whispered Tanami again. "We'll explore the river to-morrow, but even if we does see a chance we'll have to wait for M'Crimmon to show up afore we try to get clear."

In their hearts the boys feared for M'Crimmon, but they said nothing, and Tanami was relieved. He wished to keep their minds free from doleful thoughts as long as possible. He did not know that his own eloquent silences were to them as a written book.

So that evening they decided to remain within the four walls of their chamber. It became quite dark. Bob tiptoed into the hall, curious to see if any lights showed; but not a glimmer was to be seen anywhere. Evidently the twilight people had developed eyes that could see in the night, or they must slumber with the sun. Not a sound broke the stillness save for the swishing murmur of the subterranean flood—far in the depths. He crept back to his companions:

"The happy home is about as cheery as a morgue. I'm beginning to feel creepy things runnin' up and down my back."

Tanami had matches, but he hesitated to use them now as a greater need might arise for the tiny illumination they would give.

"I wish the perishin' place could be set on fire," he muttered. "I'd burn the whole boxful darn quick for that. But I'll give you a treat, my lads. You can watch me light my pipe. I reckon it's the last, for

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I ain't got any tobacco 'cept what's in the bowl."

"Strike the match near the window," suggested Stuart, a quick thought coming to him. "If M'Crimmon is anywhere about he may see it."

The bushman, who had been gazing earnestly from that vantage until the last vestige of day had disappeared, humoured the boy's will. Beyond the solid casement the twinkling stars appeared, and Bob picked out some of the brighter ones that used to disturb his slumbers, and sighed at the memories they brought back. In the short space of a day there seemed the lapse of an age.

Tanami's match flared brightly; but answering a remark from Stuart, he allowed the feeble flame to flicker and die out. A second attempt brought little result. The match-head burst like a tiny bomb, flashed its brief ray and vanished. But at the third effort the purpose was achieved.

"You've given the S.O.S. signal," said Stuart. "M'Crimmon told me that——"

"Gosh!" cried Bob, in his excitement forgetting to whisper. "There is the answer. Look!"

Far back upon the dim starlit horizon a fierce glare shone forth, and, lingering a little while, as suddenly dissolved into the night. Again it came, a short sharp spasm of dazzling brightness and then a return to gloom. And yet once more the answering beacon blazed, and then no more.

M'Crimmon was standing by.

The thrill that passed through the watchers was

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indescribable. M'Crimmon was not only to the fore but ceaselessly alert. No need now to think he had given up the search and was on the backward trail. The electric eyes of the Mastodon were looking towards them. Their comrade of the mournful countenance had only made a strategic retreat; it was clear that he was already planning a return.

"Good old Ginger!" applauded Bob softly.

They talked together long after this, for they dreaded sleep amid these eerie surroundings which were more suggestive of a sepulchre than a home for breathing life. Tanami seemed to accept the position with his usual philosophical calm. He counselled only patience, for in this, he reasoned, was the one hope of escape. Until they could find a means of exit to the plain it was foolish for M'Crimmon to come near.

"The old heathen across the way knows more'n is good for him to know," he said, "but the rest of the crowd I've seen ain't overflowing wi' intelligence, and mebbe they won't notice us pokin' around. Anyways, I reckon there's a thing or two I want to find out before we leaves—if the old sinner doesn't want to knock me on the head like a rabbit too sudden-like."

This last aspect of things the boys had not understood at all; they had refused to consider it seriously; yet on reflection they began to realize that the fanaticism of the Patriarch was too real for their liking. Anything might happen in his extraordinary domain.

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The feet of time were surely leaden that night. Each moment hesitated on its way; each hour was as an eternity. In the strained state of their nerves the boys visualized unconsciously their own thoughts.

Murky shapes evolved out of the dark and held spectral converse near, and great green eyes appeared and disappeared wherever they chanced to turn. There was no door to their cavernous room, and the void without was haunted to their imagination with all the unspeakable things that issued from the pools below.

But tired Nature had at length her way, and they slept. Then Tanami, hearing their regular breathing, crept quietly towards the unguarded space forming the entrance, and stretched himself athwart the rocky portals, so that any intruder must stumble over his body and thus give prompt alarm of his presence. And to him sleep also came.

Stuart awoke to consciousness with a sigh. He had had a confused dream in which all his remembered life had passed in pictured array before his mental vision. It was just a repetition of his waking thoughts; even in his dreams his youthful promise came to jeer at him in his futility. Yet when he awoke he was surprised to find that fear had left him, and in its place a powerful stimulus had come. Adventure was here in its most wonderful guise, and with the Mastodon out there in the night why should he think of tragedy? What purpose could the strange old man have in wishing to keep them captive for all the days of their lives as he had suggested? Even the idea was absurd.

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He put out his hand and touched Bob's sleeping form snuggled up beside him, but where Tanami had lain there was no sign of human shape. Alarmed, he groped his way around the chamber, getting his direction from the fragment of starry sky that showed through the one outlet into the night. At last he found him, and in the finding came an inkling of the thought that had caused the bushman to seek this place of rest. His heart swelled with gratitude, and he was about to creep noiselessly back when the faintest shadow of a light gleamed out beyond the *portière*. It was but a tiny flicker, but the boy was interested, for it was the first sign of illumination to appear that night, and now he thought the hour must be very late indeed, well after midnight at least.

He tiptoed lightly over the prostrate form of the bushman and was pressing through the grassy curtain into the great hall. He had made no sound, yet suddenly his ankle was clutched in a grip that caused him to wince.

"It's just me," he whispered, "there's a light outside, and I'm going to have a look——"

Tanami released his grip.

"Be careful, lad," he muttered drowsily.

Stuart emerged on the flagged floorway of the central cavern and peered into the shadows. A dim flicker issued from a distant corner on the opposite wall. It came from within an enclosure which had given no evidence of its existence on the outside. Only a chance crevice now disclosed its presence, and through

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this irregular opening a thin streak of light filtered raggedly. As near as the boy could judge, the hidden cavity, or whatever it was, must abut on the Patriarch's chamber, and yet no semblance of an opening had been seen on the wall of hieroglyphics they had viewed when they waited for the venerable man to appear. Stuart's heart gave a bound. Here might some secret be revealed. If the chink in the rock was a clean fissure he would be able to see right into the room. He struggled with intruding fear for a moment. Danger might lurk in the gloom away from his companions, but if so he would prefer not to drag them into it. Resolutely he felt his way forward, thinking every instant to collide with some unknown obstruction. It had not occurred to him that for his return passage there would be no beacon to guide him in the darkness.

His stockinged feet made no sound on the smooth hard rock as he moved step by step towards his goal. Had the ray that guided him been unexpectedly quenched he would have become hopelessly bemazed, for the cathedral-like vault he so cautiously traversed was black as a tomb save for this one spark. As he drew close a subdued muttering broke upon the solemn stillness. It rang in his ears like an incantation, so weirdly was it pitched. He came to the wall, and to his bitter disappointment found the crevice far beyond his reach. The voice ceased as he stood there, and for a moment Stuart thought his presence had been discovered. But the sing-song chant after a brief pause was resumed, and he breathed more freely.

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He wanted now to return as speedily as possible, and he decided to follow the wall around past the Patriarch's door before making a blind dash across the open. In this way he would avoid the widest part of the court, or so he thought, for his memory of direction was already hazy. With right hand pressing against the cold stone for guidance, he began the journey; but much of his courage had deserted him. The voice within the rock had a haunting quality; it might have been the wailing of a lost soul, so plaintive had the tones become. Its persistence was nerve-shattering.

All at once his hand thrust into a void, and he lurched in the same direction, a muffled exclamation forcing itself from his lips as he felt himself falling. He struggled to his feet hurriedly, and just then a stream of light issued full on his face. He was in the room of hieroglyphics, but in the centre of what he had thought was a solid wall, a high arched opening appeared, whence came a dazzling effulgence. Framed in the gap stood the aged seer, clothed in priestly vestments. He looked in no way surprised, rather his attitude was one of grave welcome.

He uttered the one word, "Come!" and the boy obeyed mechanically, yet noticing as he passed through the wall that it was indeed a section of solid rock through which a doorway had been sawn or delicately chiselled. It led into a lesser chamber lit up by several torches of resinous twigs, the smoke of which ascended to the roof. The floor was bare except where stood a

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rough-hewn block of massive stone hollowed to be the resting-place of a mighty crystal which blazed with a splendour almost overpowering to the eye. Looking up, Stuart could see the stars.

The old man took the boy by the arm and pointed to the shining sphere.

"My son," he said, "look into the light for the knowledge thou seekest, and be satisfied. Even as the future is revealed through the prophet of his people, so is the past recorded, and open to eyes that can see."

"I don't believe in magic," said the boy clearly. "I cannot see what is not there."

The old man seemed to ponder a while, but at last he made slow answer:

"The word in thy mouth has for the wise no meaning. Either a thing is, or it is not. The airs of heaven breathe that which the eyes may not see, but cunning instruments interpret the messages aright. Yet is not this as magic to the many? To earth's meanest mortals the mysteries of Nature are oft revealed, for they who are close to earth can read her secrets best. My eyes shall hold the vision of the sphere, if you will but look. And speedily, for I grow weary."

Unwillingly the boy gazed, and it seemed to him that the orb revolved, emitting lambent flame so that its outline became as a vague circling mist all glowing. He would have withdrawn his eyes, but now he could not. He felt as if he were in a dream, with conscious will alert but powerless to direct his movements.

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"The hand of time turns back," came the solemn voice of the Patriarch, sounding afar off though it was so near.

The gyrations of the ball, having attained a marvellous speed, suddenly ceased, and slowly the crystal began to rotate in a contrary direction. And now in its translucent depths the flashing lights were still, and like the iris of a giant eye a curtain seemed to gather back, disclosing a distant view. At first the boy saw nothing but a shadowy landscape of sand and plain, desolate and forbidding, over which night gloomed, for the stars were in the sky.

"Time broods over the land. It is not yet!" said the voice.

The scene changed. A blazing sun displaced the stars, and the parched wastes loomed nearer and more distinct. Into this picture came life. A man staggering with weariness and thirst and leading a cumbrously pacing camel approached over the sand; a second camel followed, its nose rope attached to the tail of the preceding animal. Behind, a little way, came another figure, that of a man who walked with steady step. The travellers drew near. Their faces and forms were now clearly distinguishable. He, ahead, was spare of build. His face was haggard with suffering, yet in his eyes was an unquenchable fire, and around the mouth a grim smile played.

"Dad!" cried the boy eagerly, but though his lips formed the word no sound was uttered. The speech was in his heart.

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The second member of the party was a bewhiskered individual with dark roving eyes that seemed never to be still. As the boy watched, this man hastened his progress to overtake the rearmost camel and drank deep from the water-bag that lapped its flank. The leading figure, which the boy had recognized, kept up his painful march. At one time he stopped, and coming near the water-bag, looked at it wistfully; but noticing how scant was the supply remaining, he shook his head and wearily returned to his post.

Again a change. It was the creek of diamonds, reached at last. Two men were digging in the channel. The camels grazed along the banks where tufts of spiny grass appeared. It was the figure of Jim Notley who dug, for a raging thirst was consuming him and he searched for water. The other was examining the clay thrown out from the excavation, and picking therefrom sundry pebbles over which he seemed to gloat. Occasionally he would lend a hand in clearing away the debris from the surface, but for the most part it was the man far spent who laboured. At length the saving fluid was found, and Jim Notley rested in the shade of a tree, moistening his dry lips with the water which he dared not drink until his fever cooled. His companion was now refilling the great canvas water-bag carried by the camel, and casting anxious glances around, as one grown suddenly alarmed. The day was far advanced; the sun was just over the western horizon; its rays, blood red, shone in the faces of the two men at the creek. In the distance dim

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shadows of natives could be seen. The men evidently feared attack, for they had rifles in their hands, and the camels were again laden as if prepared for a journey. Jim Notley was loath to go. At his feet was a pile of pebbles which glistened dully, and he wanted to add more to the number, but he knew he dared not remain.

The swarthy one was gazing at the hoarded heap, an evil light in his eye. He glanced at the waiting camels—the Blacks were yet far off and seemingly in no hurry to advance—and of a sudden his rifle butt crashed down on the head of his unsuspecting companion. All this Stuart saw as in a trance. In his heart he cried out in agony as the fell deed was done.

Jim Notley sank to the ground, and lay still. Jennet—now Stuart remembered the name—gave one look at his victim, and his whole face twisted in a snarl of triumph, and in that instant the boy recognized him as the man who had schemed to wreck the Mastodon. He knelt beside the glittering gems, greedily fingering them before stuffing them into his pockets. In his gloating joy he did not see a single warrior approach with hand uplifted, until suddenly raising his head he found the native regarding him intently. He seized the rifle from the sand where it had fallen, and in a frenzy of rage and fear fired at the motionless black, who staggered weakly for a moment, then fell face downward. The slayer rushed to the camels. The sun had set. The team marched onward into the night.

“The slaying of Yacomb!” echoed the distant voice. It was morning. The warriors sought for their

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comrade, and found him dead beside a stranger from another world, in whom life still pulsed. They debated among themselves whether this white man should not immediately be put to death. To them he appeared as the guilty one. They pronounced his doom clamourously, but a tall native whom Stuart recognized as Ibrahim stayed them with threatening words and uplifted spear. So they carried him away.

The vision blurred out of focus, then reappeared fitfully. Now showed a resplendent hall luminous with soft rainbow shades which descended in dissolving streams from some unseen source above. Where the walls narrowed at one end a darksome passage could be seen, beyond which came the gleam of swirling waters. The enclosure was thronged with gesticulating natives; they formed an agitated circle around a central figure—a white man—who stood with folded arms silently watching them. And now the Patriarch appeared beside him. His lips moved. He seemed to be addressing the multitude vehemently, and finally his arms stretched out in vain appeal. The crowd, apparently composed of two factions, struggled among themselves, but one party was overwhelmingly dominant; its members broke through the ring, brandishing their spears and pointing outwards to the pool. They seized the white man, and bore him forth. . . . A mighty flood surged and foamed with seemingly no outlet; it writhed around and against a rocky barrier. . . . They appeared with their victim——

The picture faded into nothingness, and came back

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no more. With agony in his heart, the boy looked closer. The giant eye had closed; the crystal was cold and lifeless. It rested on its firm base as if it had never moved. Nor indeed had it moved.

The spell was broken.

"They killed him!" he cried wildly. "Oh! they killed him!"

As if in response, the harsh muttering from below broke out afresh; it swelled to an ominous roar.

The seer raised a trembling hand, and pointed outwards.

"Go!" he said. "My people cry out against me. They demand the judgment. Be brave—fear not."

Blindly the boy turned and dashed through the open doorway. Looking round, he saw the Patriarch crouched in an attitude of prayer, and through a crevice in the outer wall, now visible, the first rays of the sun were stealing. A new day had come at last.

In the room of ancient carvings Tanami stood, grim and watchful. He had been there for some time. He said no word, but gripped the boy's arm protectingly. They hurried back to join their companion. Out of the morning light a faint shadow of its glory had percolated into the wide separating hall, and the stony figure in the centre was dimly outlined. Tanami wrenched this from its foundation as he passed, and shattered it against the floor. From the wreckage of the dismembered image he selected the flinty limbs and carried them with him.

Bob was still asleep when they reached their rock-

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hewn chamber, though by the fierce lunges he was making at some imaginary enemy and the audible grunts with which these onslaughts were accompanied, it was evident that even in his dreams he was having an anxious time. Stuart roused him ruthlessly.

"Gosh!" said the youth, sitting up, "I'm still alive and kickin', am I? I thought I was a goner, for the whole bally population was stickin' spears into me. I felt like a hedgehog, with all the spikes sproutin' out. Another night in this chamber of horrors, old sport, an' I'm cooked. I don't want to be a hero, dashed if I do!"

But he promptly forgot his woes when he heard of Stuart's excursion during the night, and the grim knowledge it brought.

"I thought we were havin' too easy a time to last," he muttered. "Well, if we've got to go under, I suppose it's no use whining, but it does seem pretty hard."

"Never say die, my lad," spoke Tanami. "I don't understand how the old heathen put the picture in the glass, an' mebbe it weren't true anyways."

Bob selected a jagged piece of rock from the pile the bushman had brought.

"I hope it doesn't break first pop," he said, eyeing it dubiously.

The vengeful shoutings in the underground distance seemed to gather fresh impetus, and yet they came no nearer. With this menace in their ears inaction became intolerable to the three. In the upper region of the

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rock they were imprisoned like rats in a trap unless some outlet could be found on the farther side. They determined to search around in haste, and moved stealthily outwards into the paved court. High overhead many slits and crannies could be traced, but not one aperture of any size, and even had some sufficient opening showed, it would have been utterly inaccessible. Then Stuart remembered that in the room of the huge crystal he had seen the stars through the roof. Here might be a possible exit; even if it led only to the cragged heights, they could stand at bay in the clear light of heaven, and M'Crimmon might see——!

They entered the Patriarch's chamber. It was empty, and the door in the wall was closed, the hieroglyphic markings hiding every clue to its presence. They pressed upon the rock, and Tanami levered powerfully against it with his shoulders. It was unyielding, it did not even quiver, and if the Patriarch were within, he gave no sign. Even the air now seemed charged with impending disaster; they breathed it into their lungs like a poisonous gas, and it left them weak and desponding. Afar off the cries continued.

"I believe we'd have a chance if we got into the water," said Stuart. "It's almost bound to come to the surface somewhere."

Tanami shook his head.

"There ain't no water known in these parts, lad. If a river o' such a size flowed south, it couldn't be missed *all* the way. 'Tain't a real river anyways, an' I reckon I'm too ignorant to guess what it is."

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"Let's sneak down and see what they're howling about," suggested Bob. "If we keep close to the wall they won't see us, an' we might be able to make a break through—somewhere."

Bob's optimism had not failed him even now.

They stood at the head of the natural stairway which they had ascended so hopefully only the afternoon before. It was their intuition that warned them of danger or they might have taken comfort from the fact that their savage enemies had delayed so long. The old man had unconsciously deceived them. He had given them false hope, relying on his own power to control his angry followers, or else he had spoken in riddles which they had not understood.

They went down a little way, and again hesitated. The turbulent echoes resounded hideously through the vaulted passage, yet still not a soul could be seen. They neared the area of deepest gloom where the waters flowed widest; and now they saw the exit barred by warriors who seemed to be pressing forward against a living mass without. Clubs were being swung aloft threateningly, now and then descending swiftly, and shrieks of pain were mingled with the din let loose. Ibrahim was there; head and shoulders above the rest he towered, and in the brief intervals of semi-quiet, his voice arose vociferously.

It was not difficult for the watchers to guess the position that had arisen. Ibrahim's warriors had been stationed here throughout the night to guard the passage. He, at least, had expected some form of revolt,

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but it had grown beyond his simple thought, and now the loyal few he had gathered together were sore beset.

"It looks as if the whole dashed population was anxious to get in," Bob whispered, with sinking heart. Tanami was grimly silent. Though he counselled hope, he saw none, and in his breast was a turmoil of mingled emotions. Here in the denser shadow he thought they might be passed by when the rush came.

And suddenly the human barrier was broken. With demoniacal shrieks and yells the besieging horde swept the defending force before it. Warriors fell and were trampled upon; the darksome passage was alive with vengeful hurrying shapes. Vain hope that anything could escape that frenzied band! From the accustomed eyes of the tribesmen the gloom could hide no secret. They saw their prey, and bore down upon it, screaming and chuckling in fiendish glee.

The three stood forth, Stuart and Bob side by side, Tanami a pace in front. But the bushman did not wait for the onslaught. A deep-chested grunt issued from his throat and he heaved himself forward, swinging his unwieldy weapon with both hands. With superhuman strength he struck out, and three of his enemies fell in quick succession, but he himself had been hit by one of the many clubs that slashed so fiercely at him. For a moment he staggered, and a savage swung at his defenceless head. The blow never fell, for Stuart, now waging furious battle beside him, crashed his brittle implement into the face of the native, whose waddy fell from his nerveless grip as he sank back before the

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stroke. Bob's first blow was delivered with such strenuous force that his bludgeon shivered at the shock. A moment more and he was struck down from behind. Stuart saw him fall, and made a wild dash to his aid; then he, too, fell. Tanami, alone, among a host of foes, laughed bitterly, and hurled his weighty bolt at the grinning faces that leered at him out of range. Then, no longer caring what might happen, he dropped on his knee by his young companions, and endeavoured to screen their bodies from further attack by intervening his own.

He waited for the end, angry now that it should be further delayed. Yet no one stirred to slay him, and a hush had come over the scene. Turning round, he saw that a tall native with shortened spear stood over him. It was Ibrahim, whom single-handed they all feared. But it was another who restrained the murderous impulse of the crew by offering what they had first demanded. The Patriarch had come at this crucial moment. His uplifted hand stayed them. His quavering tones appeased them. Tanami understood no word of what he spoke. He was seized by heavy clutching hands, and, with Bob and Stuart, was borne forth in triumph.

"To the judgment," the Patriarch had said. "So be it, to the judgment."

CHAPTER X

The Pool of Terrors

When Stuart returned to consciousness, his gaze rested tranquilly for a moment on a scene of marvellous beauty. He was looking upwards into a latticed dome of purest crystal from which was suspended a network of delicate tracery so ethereal that it seemed like a giant spider's web materialized in finest glass. The sun reflecting through the interstices in the outer canopy shone down upon this maze, and the rays, transmuted and diffused in a softened glory of colour, passed on to create on the walls below the dissolving effects of many rainbows. His eyes took this in, while reason struggled back to her place. His head throbbed terribly, strange noises were in his ears. Recollection came to him like a shattering blow.

"Bob! Tanami!" he cried.

"Here, lad," replied a quiet and steady voice, and the bushman's strong arms encircled him and raised him to his feet. They stood in the centre of a great stone chamber. Around them, and but a few paces distant, a dense mass of savages swayed and jostled, shrieking clamorously. Where the walls narrowed at one end a gloomy passage appeared, and the dull gleam

of rushing waters could be seen. Stuart had seen this place before. The crystal had not lied.

Bob, huddled near, slowly raised himself to a sitting posture, and stared in front blankly.

"Gosh!" he murmured, "this is a rotten dream."

When realization grew upon him that it was no fantastic unreality that met his troubled view, he accepted his lot with wonderful calmness.

Some barbaric mockery was about to take place. Many of the natives now appeared painted and fantastically bedecked. A few had their faces covered with a white powdery substance which made them look like ghouls. A greater number were bedaubed from head to foot with splashes of red colouring, and quite a lot were got up to represent animals and reptiles, the characteristics of each creature being gravely imitated by the masqueraders.

But one ungainly shape came slouching and sprawling through the dark corridor, that represented no living thing that Tanami or the boys had ever seen. It was a blubbery monstrosity, frog-headed, and with flippers like a seal. Its green eyes were large and round and unblinking. It moved forward in undulations, apparently having no feet. This horrible freak was being guided on its way by the white-faced crew, who danced around it in wild ecstasy. It came near. The Blacks opened their ranks to let it pass. It slobbered into the ring where the victims stood, and remained stock still where the impetus of guiding hands had left it. The basilisk eyes of the beast blazed uncannily, but never

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a movement came. Then suddenly the natives fell on their faces in worship.

There was no doubt about the thing being real. It exuded a rank and musty odour; its composite body oozed slime.

And then the Patriarch appeared, headed by Ibrahim and half a score of armed warriors. A gleam of hope entered Stuart's heart, but it was quickly extinguished. A sullen silence greeted the old man's approach. The assembled savages were as children caught in an act of disobedience, only they gloried in their revolt, and resented the correcting hand. In a frenzy of horror he saw the hideous oddity they would propitiate, and his shrill voice screamed out in condemnation.

He broke through the throng, and facing the *thing*, cursed it passionately. It never blinked an eyelid, but a deep hollow grunt, like a cow's bellow cut short, issued from its mouth. The aged seer stepped back, raving inarticulately. So far had his tribe degenerated that they raised for themselves false gods from the bowels of the earth.

With head bowed in shame, he leaned against Ibrahim for support. A restlessness now seized the multitude and they made a mighty clamouring. They cried out for the judgment they desired; they were impatient of further delay. The Patriarch advanced with feeble steps towards the foredoomed victims, and looking at Stuart fixedly he spoke these words slowly:

"Beware the centre of the pool. It is death. Through the cavern beneath the waters there may be safety."

He broke off into a wild speech in his own tongue, which the waiting savages, understanding, applauded with exultant shouts. He was pronouncing the judgment. It was just, for did not the ancient law demand fulfilment of its pledge, and in the fulfilment the deity of the natives would also be appeased.

Those who were to be sacrificed spoke hurriedly together. They had not seen the pool of terrors; they could but imagine that it formed a maelstrom whose centre would indeed lead to death. Through the cavern *beneath* the waters! The phrase was ominous. What meagre chance was hidden in the cryptic words?

The ghoulish natives came near; they pranced before the three with clawing hands that gradually reached closer and closer. The red-painted warriors marshalled behind them. The miscellaneous animal representations hopped and crawled and crept around emitting shrieks of glee. Tanami struck at one of the leering faces before him; a mighty blow it was, that hurled the savage backwards across the floor and against the nameless creature that stood there. The baleful image slithered over and lay prone. Stuart heard the Patriarch's voice raised in screams of eldritch laughter. Then he was seized and carried forth, along with his companions. The noise of the flood was in his ears. He braced himself for the ordeal to come.

But haste had now no part in the proceedings. The judgment had been delivered. There was to follow much mysterious rite and ceremonial beloved of the savage mind, before the crisis came. The unhappy

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three were set down by the boiling flood while their captors indulged in wild celebration. The dreaded pool was before them. Higher up, and at no great distance, they could see where the stream showed wide and sluggish. This was where the path had ascended to the upper regions where they had thought to find safety! From that point a change had taken place. The cavern enclosing the river had contracted; the channel had narrowed so that it became a defile, down which the restricted waters rushed. And the end was here, where they looked! The mad current was dashing against a rocky barrier, and recoiling, swirled in a foaming race. Where, on its first appearance from the depths, a giant spout had proclaimed the vent from which it flowed, now, at the area of its departure a revolving hollow indicated the place of vanishment. The basin in which the torrent gyrated was worn smooth and round, and across its diameter it might have measured a hundred feet or more.

The natives began their preliminary orgies. Led by the white-faced ghouls, they started in procession to encircle the pool, raucously chanting some weird invocation as they marched. The bedaubed warriors brandished their clubs, and progressed in a series of uncouth war dances, advancing and receding before an imaginary foe, and finally leaping forward in triumphant bounds. The various animal species simulated, came next, performing antics peculiar to their kind. The rank and file followed, pressing closely, for the path was narrow. Their blank visages

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showed no understanding of the scene in which they were taking part. They were excited and expectant, yet a vague fear of the Patriarch was still in their hearts. The faith of their fathers had not wholly departed from them.

For the time being, the prisoners were neglected. Enclosed by the savage moving ring, retreat was impossible and in any case futile. Into the whirlpool they might certainly plunge and thus anticipate the dread *dénouement* of the mummeries they gazed upon. The mental outlook of the Blacks did not allow for such a contingency. No living thing within their knowledge gave up life voluntarily. It was unimaginable to them that a victim would wish to hasten, by a fleeting second, the doom prepared for him.

But to Tanami and the boys the thought had come in a flash that here might lie their one faint chance of discovering the cavern—if it really existed—under the rim of the rocky basin. If they were thrown into the water they would be forced towards the vortex, whose powerful suction would quickly drag them down. If they slipped in of their own accord it might be possible to cling to the rocks where the impetus of the current first spent itself. In the direct line of the torrent's passage it was conceivable that a weakness in the barrier should exist.

At such a time as this it could not be expected that either Stuart or Bob was hopeful. They had resigned themselves to their fate, seeing no possible way of

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escape. They made no murmur, but a dreariness of spirit possessed them. Nevertheless their hearts responded at once to Tanami's whispered words of cheer.

"I reckon the rock shelves in, on the lower side, lads. If there's an opening somewheres below, it mebbe leads up into another cave that them perishin' swine don't know about. If we float round so far and ain't speared, I'll dive down an' see what's there. Get ready to follow me. Keep your heads well under—an' good luck to us!"

They shook hands as men do who set out on a desperate endeavour. Around pranced the shrieking horde, their exaltation working up to an extreme pitch of demoniacal fervour. The end was near. Already the ghouls had detached themselves from the ring. They went to fetch the horrible idol. . . .

"Now!" said Tanami.

Feet foremost and without rising they slid gently into the foam. Immediately they were swept away in a smother of leaping waters.

The natives nearest saw their prey disappear, and raised a loud alarm. In another moment the edge of the pool was lined with fierce-eyed figures staring into the depths. The sloping rim of the basin extended well above the flood and they feared to go too near, yet those behind, unthinking of the danger to their fellows, pressed forward eagerly, and lo! the pool of terrors received unexpected toll, and screams of agonized fear arose from the realm of shadowed waters.

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Meanwhile Tanami and the boys were struggling desperately to grip the rock where, underneath, it shelved inwards. Like limpets they clung for a few brief moments, and then both Stuart and Bob were snatched away by the surging tide.

This was what they had feared. Well they knew that each circuit of that dreadful cauldron would bring them nearer and nearer to its fatal centre. They battled against the tug that drew them towards the zone of death, but their efforts were puny against the resistless force that encompassed them. They had not known of the catastrophe which had befallen their gloating enemies, and now they were astonished to find themselves not alone in the frothing expanse. In an inner circle tangled heads bobbed, and passed them by, and paint-smeared faces appeared with terror now manifest where ferocity had been—all carried on a speeding tide that would inexorably fulfil its grim purpose.

The spectacle cheered Bob mightily. Company even such as this was heartening on the way. He did not bother about how they came there; it was obvious that they had not come willingly.

"Keep goin', you rotters!" he gasped. "You'll be an easy first, an' I'm not a bit jealous. Not a dashed bit!"

Stuart had wondered why no spears came, but now he thought he understood. The warriors on the bank feared to strike in case their own kind, in the confusion, might be impaled! He gave them credit for a con-

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sideration that had not occurred to them. Why should they slay the victims who were destined to be engulfed? The inmost circles of their passage would delight the watchers' gaze; they waited expectantly for the thrill that must surely come. They shrilly invoked the aid of the blubbing image they deified to save their tribesmen from the threatening death, and calmly they expected to see a miracle accomplished so that only their enemies should descend into the abyss.

So far they had not missed Tanami in the excitement that prevailed; their eyes were centred on the two white faces that showed together. They watched them eagerly.

The first circle was nearing completion, and the boys were returning to the place where Tanami had been. They fought desperately to reach the rock, but despairingly they realized that they would swing past out of reach. And Tanami was not visible! Had he too started on the awful journey? At their bitterest moment their unspoken prayer was answered.

A dark head rose to the surface; a well-known face appeared.

"Tanami!" they cried.

He rose like a triton from the depths, breathing in great gasps. His hand stretched out. They came nearer. . . . They were passing . . . just out of reach.

"Your feet! Your feet!" he shouted hoarsely.

They realized his meaning. Though their heads

were out of range, their feet might swing a yard nearer——

They made an extreme effort to tear their lower limbs from the suction that pulled so incessantly, and quite suddenly the task was accomplished. The under current seemed to weaken. They pivoted round; then Stuart felt his ankle grasped. He clutched at Bob, and together they were drawn backwards. Tanami's toes had found a niche below in which they wedged tenaciously, and his straining body now formed a bulwark for the boys. For a peaceful space the waters rived at them in vain.

Now the watchers had seen, and were crowding above, amazed and angry at the miraculous happening that had so stayed the course of death. They would not long remain inactive.

Tanami's breath was still labouring heavily. He had been long submerged, but he had discovered what he sought. There *was* an opening in the rock, and in it no suction was felt. He jerked the news out hastily.

"It's mebbe our chance, dear lads," he gasped. "Breathe deep, and *hold on to me*. Now, all together!"

He detached his foot from its resting-place and, lowering his head, dived down against the wall. His right hand gripped Stuart's wrist, and in turn the boy clutched at Bob's arm. Down, down they went. After the first few seconds Stuart felt himself being dragged into the rock. All around was blackness. The side of his body grazed against some obstacle. He dimly

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imagined it to be the edge of a cavity. Then, after what seemed a very long time, he began to move forward. His lungs were like to burst, ringing noises were in his ears. Through his brain passed the vague thought that they were in the vortex of the whirlpool. Yet he was conscious that the grip on his wrist never slackened. Tanami's unfailing instinct for direction was surely not at fault. Bob, beside him, appeared to float along without an effort. What did it all mean? And where—where were they going? A harsh roaring sound impinged upon his senses before they finally left him. Then all was peace.

Only one of the three was conscious now. The bushman's spirit rose triumphant to its task. It controlled the pounding heart and kept the mental vision clear. Some seconds yet he knew he could endure. He fought his fight with inflexible tenacity, and the reward that attends high courage was soon to be his.

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At the head of a deep defile, which clove into the heart of a massive crystalline rock, a man stood gazing fixedly at a race of waters miraculously appearing at his feet. The torrent issued from a tunnel-like opening in the gleaming strata and flowed swiftly. A short distance away it emptied ponderously into unplumbed depths in the earth's crust, and was seen no more.

He who watched so earnestly was one on whose face the lines of sorrow were graven deep. His crisping hair showed grey at the temples, and the steady blue eyes held an expression gravely sad. No alien was this

though he was garbed in the fashion of an Arab. The Anglo-Saxon breed was unmistakable.

"I wonder who the unlucky devils can be," he muttered. "Most likely some poor fools that Jennet may have sent after the diamonds, though they're rather long in coming. . . . No one would think of looking for me. He was bound to say the natives had killed me, or something of the sort. . . . If my boy had been old enough—he would have come. Poor little chap! I can almost hear him saying now, in that quaint earnest way of his, 'I'm comin' to look for you, Dad, if you don't come back—with a gun and a sextant! Thank God, he cannot come. . . .'"

Time went on, but still he waited, with an increasing anxiety as the minutes sped.

"After all, they would scarcely have a dog's chance," he reflected aloud. "God knows how I managed to get through—and I've often wished since that I hadn't managed. Death would have been better than this."

Where the waters shallowed, as they opened out over a wider area near the mouth of the tunnel, he saw a head appear, a head that seemed to toss and strain; then beside it, smothering it, two pallid faces were thrust into the life-giving air.

The watcher stepped into the channel; even a yard from the edge the torrent flowed waist high. He stretched out his arm and snatched, and then fought fiercely with the current that was loath to loose its burden. He dragged them to the side—a man and two youths—hastening feverishly lest he might be too late

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to revive the vital spark remaining in their bodies. They were linked together, hand to hand. A choking sob rose in the rescuer's throat when he saw this. "A father and his two sons," he whispered. "God grant that I may be in time."

The man lying face downwards on the rock began to breathe convulsively, and immediately attempted to stagger to his feet. Twice he failed, but the third time he succeeded. Sweeping the wet hair from his eyes, he glared frantically around seeking for his companions.

He in the Arab costume, who was bending over the boys, looked up with a smile of thankfulness, and the two men gazed into each other's faces. For a moment they stood as if transfixed, then from one came the hushed, incredulous, joyful cry:

"Tanami!"

"Jim!"

The answer was a struggling gasp. Tanami's strength was spent. He could not voice the gladness in his heart. He pointed mutely to Stuart, and he himself knelt beside Bob and strove to revive him.

Jim Notley stood by his own son, startled by a fancied resemblance to the boy he had left behind in the years gone by, but never dreaming that this was he. Stuart's eyes slowly opened. Now the likeness, treasured by memory, was complete. The man, speechless, bent forward, watching the lad's face eagerly. Surely it was recognition he saw there! He bent still farther and raised the boy's head in his arms.

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The pale lips moved, and the veriest whisper came forth:

"I've come . . . Dad . . . with a gun . . . and a sextant."

The man bowed his head, overwhelmed by a sudden deep emotion.

Tanami's drastic methods of resuscitation were quickly effective with Bob, and that young man came back to consciousness with the feeling that he had developed into a pump with two handles, both of which were in active commission. His lively interest in the position passed for a time unnoticed by the bushman, who was performing his office mechanically and zealously, not expecting that the patient would show such speedy recovery. He was staggered when a voice spoke up pathetically:

"Steady on, old hoss, steady on!"

"Jumpin' kangaroos!" ejaculated Tanami. "I reckon your heart must be stronger than a bullock's!"

"Don't know about its strength," muttered the lad, "but I'm downright certain it's not as big as yours—or I'd bust!"

He stood up giddily, and saw the flood issuing from the tunnel. He shuddered. Then his glance took in the stranger who was talking to Stuart in low tones.

"Gosh!" he said softly to himself. "This johnny's white!"

Stuart beckoned him. He stepped unsteadily forward. He heard his chum say:

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"Dad, this is Bob," and he felt his hand gripped tightly.

Out of bewilderment a great joy came to him, but for once he kept himself well under control.

"We've had a dashed hard job finding you, sir," he said calmly. "I—I hope you are well."

CHAPTER XI

Some Mysteries Explained

"And now," said Jim Notley, with a return to the buoyant manner of bygone days, "there is much to say, and it will be a real treat for me to talk to someone other than myself. But I'm not going to begin my end of the story until you've had something to eat. There's only fruit, but there's any amount of it, and that's one comfort."

They were in a room not unlike the one they had so unhappily inhabited the night before, only it contained some rude furnishings, and the bareness of the walls was relieved by drapings of some coarse woven vegetable substance. In the centre of the floor was a three-legged table with a top composed of sheets of bark. On this was heaped a plentiful supply of bananas, paw-paws, grenadillas, and mangoes—sure evidence that, somewhere near, the earth yielded bounteous store.

There were many little ornaments in niches here and there, and scattered haphazard around—all bearing witness to the patient labour that had gone into their construction. So had the heart-weary man

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sought to beguile the endless hours, his only tool—a simple pocket-knife!

He noticed them look at his humble handiwork, and smiled.

“Idleness was unbearable,” he explained. “At first I thought I should go mad, and I whittled and carved for dear life; but later on I found something better to occupy my mind. Look!”

From an alcove he took a roll of papyrus, and opening it out a little way showed that it was covered with minute writings.

“The old man could spare me only a single sheet,” he went on, “and I had to make the most of it. The ink was no problem, but it was hard to get anything fine enough to write with. A buzzard’s quill fixed me up at last. I remembered I used to be able to inscribe the Lord’s Prayer on a piece of paper the size of a threepenny bit. I never dreamed that I should later have to write a volume in the same microscopic hand. But there it is! And there’s some room left yet. If it is ever transcribed the job will almost require a magnifying-glass, for I can’t read it myself though I’ll guarantee every letter is carefully formed.”

Stuart took the crackling parchment in his hand, and examined it with awe. At the top of the curving page one line stood out bolder than the rest, yet his sharp eyes could decipher it only with difficulty. He read aloud:

“The Story of an Ancient Tribe marooned in the

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Heart of Australia at the time of Great Upheaval, when the Asiatic Continent detached from its Southern Lands; degenerated at this day almost to the level of savages owing to the influence of environment, yet retaining in a line of patriarchs the culture and wisdom of a once great people. Also is here set down an astounding explanation of Australia's underground water resources, known commonly as the Artesian Supply, and a revelation is made and the origin established of a widely discussed Native Superstition. The whole, narrated by a humble student of geological science who forfeited his own liberty in discovering the marvels here related."

"This should be the most interesting book in the world, Dad," he said with pride.

Jim shook his head, and sighed.

"The last sentence you read out will apply to all of us now, my boy, for, though being considered dead, we might escape in the night to the open bush, our plight would be worse than ever out there. I have considered it often. Tanami knows that without camel transport no white man, at any rate, could have a hope of life."

Tanami and Bob both started to speak at once. It had flashed upon them simultaneously that Jim Notley knew nothing about the Mastodon. Even they had forgotten it in the excitement of finding themselves alive. In the race for speech the boy was an easy winner. He joyfully proceeded to disperse all unpleasing prospects.

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"The Mastodon——" he began eagerly. "The Mastodon——"

Jim Notley wheeled about as if expecting to see some prehistoric monster slouching along the passage.

"Don't blame you, my lad," he muttered. "Your nerves have had a pretty rough shaking, but there isn't any Mastodon around, thank goodness."

Stuart started to explain, but Bob desperately bore down all opposition. Here surely was a chance for his eloquence.

"The Mastodon isn't a beast—it's—it's a caterpillar. The engineering triumph of the age! Yes, sir. And it's come out from England to find you, an' I'm dashed if it's going to go back without you. It's *the* Mastodon—Murray's Mastodon. Invented by Colonel Murray—my dad! Nothing like it in the world——"

He paused for breath.

Notley was obviously impressed. Nay, more, he was thunderstruck. A glow of joy swept over his features.

"Hold on, Bob," he said hurriedly, taking a step forward and gripping the lad by the arm. "Is this—Mastodon—out of reach of the natives? They'll have wrecked it if it's any way near. Are you sure it's all right?"

His own son could have reassured him in fewer words, but Bob swept on like a cyclone.

"No dashed fear about that, sir! Red-headed M'Crimmon will be chasin' round for us at this very

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minute. We signalled to him last night. The whole thing's goin' to work out fine. Stuart brought the bally old chariot here, an' Stuart will take it away, with us all stickin' on like glue, and bound for Home Sweet Home. That's what's goin' to happen. Gosh! The story will read even better than I thought."

Jim Notley looked at his son with eyes that shone strangely, then his gaze rested on Bob. From one to the other he turned, mystified, and a gently thoughtful expression crept into his face.

"A gun and a sextant!" he murmured. "Yes, and with the latest in science as well. Tanami, old friend, you and I have seen many strange things, but nothing so wonderful as this. Great is the glory of youth!"

Stuart flushed, and Bob gasped in alarm, then by a common impulse the two took hold of Tanami, one at each arm, and pushed him forward. It was the spontaneous tribute of youth to experience.

"And there's another member of the merry party who'll just howl when he hears what he's missed," said Bob. "Stand-by M'Crimmon would have enjoyed that bally pool of terrors, an' the finishin' stunt would have tickled him to death."

"It might even have done that," admitted Jim thoughtfully. "The point is, how are we going to get in touch with this fire-eater? I suppose you are quite sure that he won't take it into his head to—to go away, and—leave us here? He must know by this time that he's up against a pretty stiff proposition——"

"No need worryin' 'bout M'Crimmon, Jim," inter-

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jected Tanami, with a slow smile. "He's one o' them curious sort o' cusses that keeps lookin' for trouble, but when he finds it I reckon he's a sticker. He gave us our signal last night so sudden-like that he must have been watchin' like a cat."

"What sort of a signal, Tanami?"

"Dunno," replied the bushman hopelessly. "I ain't any idea o' them things, but Stuart said I gave the S.O.S. message by accident. The blinkin' matches were no good."

"He answered it, Dad," put in Stuart eagerly. "The big headlights were switched on three times, with a short flash in the middle."

"The Morse answering code. Good!" exclaimed Notley, with unconcealed delight. "This M'Crimmon is going to be worth his weight in—diamonds. If, as it seems, he understands Morse, I can talk to him to-night—if he is within ten miles of us. And that reminds me—I saw a camp-fire out there a couple of nights ago; it must have been yours, for I've never known natives to make a decent smoke yet. I went nearly crazy trying to catch your attention, but finally gave it up, because I was by that time convinced that I had made a mistake.

"Gosh!" cried Bob, "that must have been the bally old star that was winkin' in my face when I was trying to sleep!"

Stuart remembered it too, and sighed to think of the anxieties all might have been spared had he understood. He went over to the light-giving crevice in the

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outer rock and tried to locate in the distance where the Mastodon had halted. He could find the place quite easily, for there the sun was shining on something that reflected its rays in vivid flashes of light. He came back to the others.

"He's there," he said, "and he's facing this way."

Jim Notley stretched his arms heavenwards, and gave thanks for his impending deliverance.

"I have been well down in the slough of despond, Tanami," he said gravely; "and now, while we have some time to wait, I'll tell my story, and make it as short as I can. Afterwards I hope you may all read it—when it is published as a book. But no! I owe my life to the Patriarch, and I must keep his secret. I had not thought of that. Black or no Black he has played the game, with you as well as with me."

They gathered around him on the floor.

"At the beginning," said Jim, "I was disappointed in Jennet. He came to me with the story that he had been looking for diamonds down in the Macdonald Ranges, and had afterwards made his way up north by easy stages prospecting for opals and sapphires on the route. With that experience at his back I thought that he would be just the man for me, since Tanami hadn't showed up, and in some way too I gathered that he knew more about my particular mission than he pretended. There had been some whispers going round about diamonds having been discovered by Tanami and me on our cross-country journey, and I suppose that would be enough to attract anyone interested. I

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rather think now that he had been connected with the business in Africa, and had to leave the mines there more or less hurriedly—perhaps he had been mixed up in I.D.B. traffic or something of the sort. There was no doubt about his knowledge on the one subject of precious stones, however, and it wasn't for me to question him too carefully.

"We joined forces. I promised him a third interest in whatever we might find. He haggled for a half, but I wasn't going to let my old mate's share go by the board. A third it had to be, or I would go alone."

Tanami interrupted here with a sympathetic grunt, and then was silent.

"We got going," continued the narrator, "and pretty soon I realized that my partner was a dud. He got so weak that he couldn't keep up, though he looked strong enough all the time. He developed some sort of grudge against me, too, and he nursed it from day to day. I suppose I must have been a bit hard on him to begin with. The first well we reached was dry, and I cut down our water ration, expecting that all our old locations might have evaporated in the same way. I was right in this, but I knew we carried enough in the water-bags to last, with care, until we reached the creek, and there I was pretty certain to get water by digging. . . . We had a tough time. The funny thing was that Jennet got strong as I got weak. He was as fit as a fiddle when we finally reached our destination, but I was a wreck."

To Stuart all this was as a story told for the second

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time. He had actually *viewed* it. He knew how Jennet had kept up his strength, and yet his Dad was unsuspecting even now! A thrill of wonder passed through the boy, but he held himself in check. He would not speak until the grim climax proved beyond all doubt that the vision of the crystal had not been merely a deception of his senses.

Bob and Tanami, too, were powerfully moved. Stuart had told these same happenings to them. They too sat silent and expectant, awaiting the final verification of the mystery.

Notley proceeded. He described how he found water in the creek after penetrating through a layer of diamond-bearing clay. He spoke of the natives appearing in the distance, and how he and his companion debated as to what should be done.

"Jennet seemed to go a bit crazy at this time," he said quietly. "The sight of the diamonds acted on his nerves like a poison. He raved and blasphemed dreadfully. He was mortally afraid of being speared, yet he hated to go away. I could see nothing for it but to get out in a hurry. I explained that we could reach Tanami by travelling a little to the north of west, and that we could return with a stronger party. This appeared to quieten him a bit, but I didn't like the nervous way he had of handling his gun. I don't believe in shooting Blacks just because they *might* be dangerous. I told him this. Perhaps I was rather irritable and expressed myself too forcibly. You can imagine that I wasn't feeling very cheerful at the

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time. The diamonds meant—a tremendous lot to me. He stood aside sulking while I got together the little store of shining pebbles we had gathered. At least, I thought, as I looked at them, there would be a fair value in the little heap. That's as far as I got. I heard Jennet move. I thought he was going to speak. Then something crashed on my head, and that finished things for me. If I hadn't been wearing a helmet, my skull would have been smashed like an egg-shell. I suppose the mad impulse just came to him. I should not like to think that he deliberately tried to kill me——”

He stopped and looked round with some surprise. His listeners were behaving strangely. They eyed one another with questioning looks, and Tanami was muttering vengeance upon the doer of the dastardly deed.

Stuart could restrain himself no longer.

“I saw everything in a crystal last night, just as you say, Dad. I told the old man that I didn't believe in magic—and I don't. But it's true all the same. I never knew that there could be anything so wonderful!”

His father gave a short laugh.

“I thought I wasn't surprising you very much,” he said. “I didn't know old Zarabisra had been giving you enlightenment. How far did you see, Stuart?”

“That was nearly the last of it,” the boy replied. “When the natives came along, they wanted to kill

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you, because Jennet had shot one of their warriors, and I think they thought you had done it. After that the picture blurred a lot. There was a glimpse of that hall we were in, where the colours kept changing. You were there, just the same as we afterwards were, only I didn't see that horrible beastly thing. After that, the awful pool appeared and then the whole show stopped like a machine run down."

"You saw the Hall of Rainbows, and the Pool of Terrors," reflected Jim. "Something must have happened to disturb the sequence."

"The fellows below who wanted to get at us started to kick up a terrible racket 'bout that time," Tanami hazarded.

"Ah, that would do it. The poor old Patriarch has been testing his will against growing savagery every since I've been here. Probably he recognized then that he was powerless to save you, and that would upset his concentration on the one subject he had been trying to make clear. It is easier for him to talk to you through your sight than with his speech; but you can think it out for yourselves when I've finished."

He resumed the thread of his narrative before his audience had time to digest what he had said.

"I came to my senses in the cave you probably occupied last night. It looks towards the west. I was there for over a week, I think, before it dawned on me that my future wasn't just as safe as it might be. I dragged this much out of our cheerful friend Ibrahim, who attended me. By very expressive signs he

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had little difficulty in making it evident to me that the tribe below thirsted for my life's blood. Then the strange old man, who had been a frequent silent visitor, came along, and, uncannily reading my troubled thoughts, suddenly spoke to me in my own language and explained the tribal custom, which demanded a life for a life. He knew that I was guiltless but the rest of them didn't. Consequently I was to be duly judged and certainly condemned.

"I won't harp on the experience I went through. I should wish no living soul to endure a similar torment even if he were my worst enemy. Yet, by the strange workings of fate, my own son and my truest and best friend have come through the same horrors. . . . I saw the weird ceremonial to the end. The Patriarch had said plainly that on the south side of the pool there was a submerged passage. I didn't believe him. I thought at that time that he was just a mad old freak. I would have sold my chance of life for tuppence. Still, I clutched at that one slender straw at the last. I reasoned it all out as I sat there—a spectator at my own obsequies.

"The force of that swirling current would beat any swimmer, and I was weak and not fit to battle long against odds. If an opening really existed, a long dive would find it, or oblivion against the rock below. I had no fancy for exploring the central avenue of exit from this world, if I could help it.

"I took the dive at the last moment, just as the ghoulis gentlemen were coming along to give me a

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hand—and I knew no more until Ibrahim fished me out at the same place where I got you. That was—ages ago. Then came to life the Hermit of the Skies, the mysterious holy man who lives, none know where. He is free only because he is feared. Only in a little less degree than the Patriarch is he feared, for superstition rules the herd. But a very fine line separates fear and hatred, and though none recognize the white man they slew, in the brown man who is occasionally seen in their midst, there is little doubt that the latter inoffensive individual would be cheerfully extinguished on his own account if the Patriarch lost control of his people.”

Bob shivered.

“I’d like to poison the whole bally bunch,” he muttered.

Notley shook his head slowly in reproof.

“You’re inclined to judge them from a wrong standard, my lad,” he said. “I don’t blame you in the least little bit after what you’ve come through. All the same, this tribe, taken in the mass, is head and shoulders above any other savage race you will see in Australia; and if you consider the Patriarch alone, I am doubtful if you could find his equal in some directions nearer than the Potala in Tibet. And the point is”—here he addressed Tanami particularly—“this tribe is not savage at all! It is not even properly black. At first sight it might appear to be an extraordinary misfit in the aboriginal family, but on close study it becomes something more than that.”

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"I reckon you're right," agreed Tanami. "I ain't ever seen nigs like them before, no never."

Notley smiled. Getting away from the personal element, he could speak more freely. He was forgetting self in the interest of his subject.

"Just you listen to me, Tanami, and I'll tell you some of the results of my observations here among these people. What I have to say will bring in geography, geology, history, and—what some Australians will call mythology, though I shall take the shadow of a so-called great myth away, and leave a real substance in its place. You, Stuart, and you, Bob, give me your closest attention, for what I am to speak should be of immense interest to the younger generation who may have a hand in shaping Australia's destiny."

Tanami shuffled about uneasily. He dreaded the scientific touch, which he could never understand. He looked plaintively at his old companion, but Notley's eyes were now shining with enthusiasm. The bushman sighed and tried to appear earnestly engrossed. As for the boys, they pressed nearer, delight showing on their features. Now they were to learn the cause of much that was marvellous to them. They waited to hear, breathlessly.

"In the long ago," began Notley, "but maybe not so very long ago as most people think, Australia was not an island."—Here Tanami sat up and began to take notice.—"It was united to the mainland of Asia up through what is now called the Polynesian Sea.

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A chain of islands still marks the route of that ancient peninsula. You have only to look at a map to see how naturally the whole world of the East must have been linked together.

"In that age the earth had wide boundaries. It was a huge pasture-land for flocks and herds; and then the business of life was mainly concerned with flocks and herds. Near the shores of the Mediterranean many important tribes had their habitation, and to them a great knowledge came. They grew in numbers and in wisdom, and founded mighty cities to the glory of God. They fought many wars with surrounding people, and pursued their ways triumphantly, but finally they themselves were subdued by barbaric hosts from an adjoining country.

"Some of the tribes escaped the slaughter and avoided captivity by flight. Harassed by enemies wherever they went, they could find no rest. They divided into sections, so as not to appear like an invading army, and to all points of the compass they scattered, each tribal band being led by its titular chief or patriarch. Each division became a unit in itself, and moved on with its sheep, its goats, and its cattle. Actually it became a travelling city, compact and self-sustaining.

"Such a large caravan progressed, as they say of the armies of to-day, on its belly, and in this case its belly—which was its flocks and herds—went ahead. In course of time, a mighty pilgrimage could be made in this way.

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"Zarabistra's prototype of that far-off period was the leader of one section. He must have been a sort of Moses of his day, intent on getting his people as far away from danger as possible. Another party, we know, penetrated through China and into the far north-east. Whether it ever returned is in no man's power to say. But here, beside us, we have the remnant of the branch that came thus far."

Bob's cheeks, which had been puffing alarmingly, exploded in a terrific "Gosh!"

"Of course," continued Notley, "the natural conditions of this place then were vastly different from what they are now. Broad meadows existed where the sands now lie, and at least one great river with its branches irrigated the country around. Then—still in the remote past—the cataclysm took place, and the shape of the unknown world was altered in a day. The peninsula or isthmus connecting Australia with the mainland was shivered and submerged except for the islands which now appear in its place. The sea rolled between the tribe and the land of its forefathers; retreat was now impossible for evermore.

"Simultaneously, from the Gulf of Carpentaria southwards, the earth buckled and subsided, and the waters of the ocean took possession of the low-lying areas. At a still further distant period, all this region had been submerged, but Nature was not yet prepared to repeat the performance. The sea receded when the turmoil was over, and the people who had taken shelter in the caves of this very rock rushed out to

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find that their worldly possessions had nearly all been swept away. Of their flocks and herds, numbering tens of thousands, less than a tenth remained.

"The river, too, had vanished, but a new flood had mysteriously appeared issuing from the bowels of the earth, traversing only a short way before it extinguished itself in bottomless depths.

"The Chronicles of the tribe show that in these altered circumstances they rapidly deteriorated. There was left to them but one small fertile spot directly above the river where it widens out into a broad and shallow lagoon. It is enclosed by a junctioning branch of this same range which opens out like a gigantic crater not far from where we are now. You overlook it from the roof above the Patriarch's room. You can see it from here, only it wouldn't be safe to go on top.

"In nature nothing stands still. It either advances or recedes, and so in the case of this tribe, as it couldn't possibly progress either mentally or physically in its new environment, it followed the other sure course to extinction. Long, long ago the main upper caverns were set apart for the wise men of the tribe and their families. They were chiselled out by clever hands, and furnished and decorated almost luxuriously. The main population had its home below; it was ready-made for them and it sheltered them from the fierce heat of the sun.

"The wise men had a hopeless task down through the generations. You must remember that the country

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was peopled only by savages, and Zarabistra's records show that over and over again the Twilight Dwellers had to resist attack from hordes of aborigines. This they did easily enough; then they carried the war into the enemies' camp and brought back prisoners. They became known and feared by the Blacks and were finally accepted by them as a superior race of their own kind.

"You might think that when white men came to inhabit the fringe of the country, the race would have rehabilitated itself. No. It had gone too far on the downward grade. Where white man and savage meet the latter is always hastened on his way to perdition. This is a pity, but it is a fact. The white man's customs are not good for primitive minds. In other words, a savage must be brought up by slow stages to an understanding of civilization.

"Some notable missionaries, such as Chalmers of New Guinea, and Paton of the South Seas, knew the secret that could transform wild humanity into a state of happy tranquillity, but the secret is not shared by the rank and file of commercialdom.

"Therefore the reigning patriarch in his wisdom strenuously strove to hide the existence of his people from all Western eyes. Again, you will ask, how did he know of the white man's coming to the land? The answer is simple. First, because the patriarchs developed a sort of sixth sense in their solitary meditations. While their tribe diminished and degenerated, they seemed to have minds that reached towards the stars.

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Then again, the natives with whom they are allied have a method of conveying information that is as infallible as wireless.

"As all bushmen know, smoke signals are used for communicating the presence of one tribe to another, but I don't think anyone has ever realized that the system has wonderful ramifications. It involves a code that is surprisingly intricate, and news can be sent by relays over vast distances in a few minutes. Indeed, before the first signaller has ceased sending up his 'smoke clouds' the beginning of his message may be being read many hundreds of miles away. Probably some of the earlier patriarchs elaborated the first simple idea so that they might keep in touch with everything that was going on. Anyhow, the fact is that to-day the observant Black can read his morning newspaper in the sky, if he be so inclined."

"I reckon that explains how the wells have a habit of dryin' up afore we comes along," Tanami commented.

The narrator nodded, and went on.

"I have tried to explain why this particular tribe wished to remain isolated, but you have just reminded me of another reason which is perhaps more powerful than any with the bulk of the people. Here, as you have seen, is water in abundance. This one feature alone, if it were known, would attract armies of all sorts and conditions. Prospectors would come in their myriads, and cattle-men, always on the look out for good country, would annex the river, and pump the

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water over the land by windmills. In a short time it would really be a case of the desert blossoming like the rose, but in the process this remnant of a race would perish utterly. They would be dispossessed of their heritage, and forced out to the plains to mingle with their purely savage brethren. Or they might linger here mute and servile to the intruder. Either way it would mean the end of them.

"Then, though we white lords of the world are apt to think arrogantly that the interests of a poor black community are as nothing in the path of progress, it must not be forgotten that the patriarchs have always held a very different opinion. Only in Zarabistra's time has it been necessary to give the ultimate possibility of dispossession much thought, and to him the bare idea is dreadful. In the great scheme of things he imagines his people have been playing quite an important part. He is quite sure that their degradation is a punishment for some unknown misdeeds of their forefathers, and that they must go down to extinction in fulfilment of a preordained plan. That they will die out soon is inevitable, and all he asks is that they may be left in peace until their destiny is accomplished.

"So far as I can gather, the population of the Twilight Kingdom numbered at one time many thousands. Now, counting men, women, and children—and there are few of the last—it is no more than three hundred. Some years back a plague decimated them or they might have lasted out a little longer. As it is, they are dwindling year by year—a clear case of race suicide.

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And of course they are sunk so low in the social scale that they are really now only a superior type of savage, and to the horror of the Patriarch they have come to the stage of seeking after the gods of the Blacks. Their minds can no longer grasp the higher teachings, and have become susceptible to the superstition of the generality of natives.

"In one way they have been sorely tempted to defection, for the monstrous thing worshipped by their outlying neighbours actually had its origin in their midst. The horrible creature that you saw was the living actuality of what is generally supposed to be a myth."

Tanami was gazing at him blankly:

"You don't mean," he said, "you don't mean that that blinkin' thing was—was——"

"I just do," replied the other, smiling. "I rather thought you would get a shock when you knew it."¹

"Dunno," murmured the bushman, not yet wholly satisfied. "Nobody has ever seen the genuine article, though there is a lot of talk about it. The nigs say it lives in deep water-holes, and they're scared to speak 'bout it."

"It is not impossible," continued Notley, "that the natives may have sound reason behind what they say, though they are always disbelieved. If, as I think, this denizen of the underground here is the elusive freak one hears so much about, then this must be the distributing centre for the species!"

¹ The Bunyip—the fabled monster of the Aborigines.

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"How could that be, Dad?" asked Stuart. "Since it is supposed to live in the water, you would not think it could walk very far."

"In explaining this," Notley said gravely, "I am going to touch on a very big subject. In fact, I meant to tackle it at the beginning, but it seemed necessary to get you interested in the tribe so that you would be prepared for much that I have to tell. I am not going to give scientific reasons now for what I say. I have gone into the matter thoroughly in my book.

"Briefly, then, this subterranean flood is a direct result of the great convulsions of nature which altered the whole aspect of the country. It opened up a line of weakness which extends from the snowy heights of the Himalayas down to the Antarctic, and here is the first point where pressure against the fluid force was met. I mean that this river had been deflected up from a submarine channel by what geologists would call an intrusion in its course. Originally it may be the melting snows of Asiatic mountains that we see here. I hold that view. It just happens to be that an obstruction was created which compelled the waters to come to the surface.

"For all we know, or are ever likely to know, the torrent might have been passing beyond the three-mile limit, as the Americans would say, when happy chance threw it up into Australian strata."

"Comin' from so far away, I reckon it might have played the game and been a better emigrant," grumbled Tanami. "It only lasts for a mile or less

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and then in two perishin' gulps it is gone. It would have been a godsend to Australia if it had stayed on top."

"Well, it did the next best thing, old friend. Where do you think the artesian supply that you find all over the country comes from?"

The bushman's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"I'll be jiggered!" he said slowly, as comprehension dawned. "This here blinkin' place is going to be mighty important when folks know."

The boys, not fully understanding, said nothing.

"I'll leave it at that," Notley reflected aloud. "The subject is too big to grip all at once."

"But what about our giddy little playmate downstairs?" inquired Bob. "You were going to tell us how he wandered about frightening the natives all over the country."

Notley laughed softly.

"That outrageous caricature," he said, "is a product of the depths. It normally lives under great pressure, and that's why it has no particular shape. It is blind in the light, so its unwinking eyes give it an appearance of owlsh wisdom. It is forced to the surface occasionally by accident, but it doesn't enjoy its stay in the upper waters at all. It finds its way to the exit as speedily as it can and down it goes again, via the Pool of Terrors. But it doesn't get so far down this time, and wherever the flood may be tapped, naturally or by bores, it is quite reasonable to expect that a sample of the species might sometimes be in evidence to alarm

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any beholder. The creature is amphibian to a certain extent, and one specimen showed such a liking for the company of the dingo pack kept by the tribe that it took up its abode near hand. The fiercest animal won't go within yards of it, and the people take this fact as a sign of the Thing's power. I think myself that it is on account of the unpleasant odour which emanates from it.

"I have nearly finished, because I don't mean to tell you now of the incidents that happened during the weary years. I want only to satisfy your curiosity a little and hear my own voice, which had gone rusty with disuse."

"I should like very much to know one thing, Dad," Stuart broke in, after some hesitation. "Can you tell me how it was possible for the Patriarch to speak to us in our own language if he had never studied it before?"

"No, my boy, that I cannot do with any certainty that I would be right. As the great poet said: 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' It is beyond me to understand Zarabisra's uncanny gifts, though he himself has told me that they come through concentration of the mind in some form or other. I know that the Dalai Lama of Tibet is supposed to be able to converse in any language, even if he had never heard or thought of it previously, and I am inclined to think that our poor old Patriarch has achieved a similar state. The complexity of the human mind is unknowable; its power is far-reaching and far-searching.

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"The vision of the crystal can be accounted for only in the same unsatisfactory way. In the first instance it had been seen by the seer himself. He found it easier to make you view the story rather than that he should speak it. The seeing eye has universal sight, but the ear can recognize sounds only that it has been educated to hear. These things do not constitute magic, Stuart; they can be no more than the revelations of the Science of Thought."

He ceased, and his audience too remained silent for a little while, pondering the things he had said. At length Bob, whose mind was running along more practical lines, bestirred himself and ventured a final question.

"What about the diamonds in the creek, sir? Do you think anyone will ever be able to get them?"

The man looked at the boy wonderingly for a moment, then seemed to recollect something, and laughed.

"The diamonds!" he echoed. "I had actually forgotten all about them. I scarcely imagine anyone will rediscover them now, Bob. I thought at first that Jennet might find his way back, but as you know from your own experience, the creek is hard to find. Unless, of course, he remembered the mountain, and got near enough to take his bearings from it. And that would certainly be the end of him. Now that there is a prospect of getting away, I suppose I ought to give the worldly aspect of things some consideration."

He rose to his feet, went over to the alcove where his

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manuscript was deposited, and returned with a roughly carved wooden case the size of a large cigar box. It had no lid, being hewed apparently from a solid block. He calmly emptied its contents on the floor.

The three beholders gazed in an awed silence at the array of glittering pebbles strewn before them. Here was surely treasure in plenty.

Bob swallowed hard and gained his speech at last.

"Gosh!" he whispered. "Everything's happened just splendidly."

Notley's face held an inscrutable smile.

"These are only a few picked from a considerable bulk," he said quietly. "In the canyon below they occur near the crater where the water finally disappears, just as they did where they were first found. I have come to the conclusion that this much-vaunted gem is a scarce commodity in the world only because its distribution is in the hands of a few who control the known supply, so far. Nature is not niggardly in her work where their production is concerned, but her laboratories, though large, are few. As things are, however, this little supply represents fortune for each of us. Many times, in my despair, I cursed the foolish baubles that had cost me all I held dear in life. But God is good. . . . Now I am well content."

"I don't want any o' the blinkin' things," spoke Tanami, "but I'm downright glad, Jim, that you've got 'em."

"If you took all that you see, Tanami, old mate of mine, you would not be half repaid for your loyalty;

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but it is foolish for me to say even this, for I know that your friendship is far greater than riches."

"And I can't take anything, sir," protested Bob. "I don't want them, dashed if I do. It was *you* we came out to get, and when the old Mastodon gets us safely out of this, it'll have made a name for itself that will be worth a fortune to good old Dad. But I'm awfully glad. Gosh! I am glad!"

"What do you say, Stuart?" asked the man who had endured so much for the wealth that was there. "How can I reward my own son for his faithfulness to a childish promise that has brought me life and gladness and hope afresh?"

"You know, Dad, that I don't want anything more than I've got. But Mother might——"

"So," said Jim, "I cannot even give away what I struggled so hard to obtain. But I'll get over the difficulty by another means. You shall each choose all that you care to take with you from the pile in the canyon, and we'll chance a glut in the market for Twilight Diamonds."

There came the sound of slight movement from a corner of the room. An opening leading to the ridge overhead was blocked by a descending figure. A moment more and the Patriarch stood before them.

CHAPTER XII

Tanami's Last Trail

Zarabisra gazed at the little group with eyes that seemed to pierce and search into the innermost chambers of each one's heart. The boys' heads lowered; a feeling of dread came over them. Tanami's attention wavered, then wandered to the entrance by which the old man had arrived. He had not noticed it before, and Notley had not thought of explaining its presence.

Jim Notley met the seer's glance steadily, and for over a minute the two remained motionless and face to face. To Stuart the silence appeared ominous. Were all their hopes to be dashed at this last moment by the intervention of the Patriarch? Why couldn't he speak, if only some unintelligible jargon? The tension was becoming unbearable.

And at last, in a thin, far away voice, the Patriarch spoke.

"It is well," he said. "Thou and those that are with thee may pass in peace, and my will, which turneth towards thy plannings, shall restrain thee no more. In thy heart I see but sympathy for the weary prophet who bears a heavy burden. Because of my faith I shall let thee go. The smoking chariot evadeth the warriors

who would encompass it. Behold, it vanisheth like a wind-driven cloud, and no man can pursue it. Yet I know that even this mighty thing thou hast power to control, both its coming hither and its going hence. Again I say, it is well. But beware those of my race who lie in wait for the fire-breathing thing to come near. They watch for it night and day, thinking to slay it as a creature of evil. In their growing darkness they understand not the wonderful workings of progress, neither do they see the inscrutable hand of Fate. But a little while is given me to cumber the earth, and on Ibrahim shall my mantle fall, for none are left of the ancient line. He inherits only a warrior's gifts and his faith wavers like the reed that bends before the blast. So, should ye chance to return hither, ye may find my kingdom gone to its place, leaving only the graven records of ages where the patriarchs have lived. These I charge thee then to interpret diligently and with the understanding that cometh of the heart, so that the wide world may know how the dwellers of the Twilight kept the faith. I, Zarabisra, the last of the prophets, give thee greeting and farewell."

He raised his gaunt arms in benediction. Almost at once they dropped to his side; his head sank upon his breast. He would have fallen had not Notley leaped to his aid and supported him.

With a clatter of spear and shield Ibrahim now made sudden entry. Evidently he had awaited on top at the seer's command.

Zarabisra opened his eyes and spoke in a strange

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tongue to the warrior, who, instantly discarding his weapon, prepared to carry the aged chief forth. But before he finally went off with his burden he turned with a smiling flash of white teeth to the mute assembly, and gave a parting salutation.

"Ednbro, Loon-den, Seed-nee. Ibrahim very fine fellow. Hoo-ree!"

It was Bob who weakly responded, "Hoorah!" The others were lost in thought.

"That's the last we'll see of Zarabisra," said Notley, waking up as from a dream; "and very likely the last of Ibrahim, too. He came to us like the Pharaoh of old who would not let the people go, but he relented at the eleventh hour, and has placed his trust in the white man's honour. While he lives we must keep his secret. When Ibrahim comes to reign it will be a different matter. He can never hold the tribe together. They who may be left will mingle with the savages on the plains. So the end will come."

He went over to the aperture commanding a view of the west, and looked for the sun. It was already well under the zenith. The afternoon was waning; night was at hand.

"Our talk must have taken longer than I thought," he said, coming back, "and I want you to see my mine before it gets quite dark in the gorge. You'll laugh at it, Tanami, for it has been gouged out with wooden tools that I made myself. It's no more than a shallow trench, but such as it is, it served its purpose."

They returned to the gloomy region where the last

of the sunken river roared its way into the waiting abyss, and near the point of downfall Jim's mine was disclosed. As he had said, the excavation did not go much below the surface, but it was both wide and long. Near the heaps of bluish clay that had been thrown out was a pile of nodular fragments similar to those they had already seen in the box above.

"There you are," said Notley, with a laugh. "I didn't even trouble to take this stuff away. The diamonds were a bit too plentiful for my liking, and at the best I began to realize they could mean nothing to me."

"And each bally bit may be worth a hundred and twenty golden goblins!" gasped Bob.

"Like enough, my lad, but I don't think the market would stand too much of a shock, and the value would be sure to come down if Twilight Diamonds became numerous. We had better take a few more, all the same, for the common good, as I don't think we are likely to be tempted to come again."

Bob glanced fearfully at the waters issuing from the tunnel, and shuddered.

"It's lucky for all of us that that escape channel was there, dreadful as it is," continued Notley, noticing the boy's look. "After the fact, one can reason it out calmly and understand just why it is there. It was no special dispensation of Providence just for our benefit."

Tanami's face assumed a thoughtful expression. He knew an explanation was coming.

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"Another line o' weakness, mebbe?" he hazarded with great good humour.

"In a sense, yes," agreed Jim, "but mainly, I think, it is a safety-valve provided by Nature. At one season of the year—when the snows are melting on the Himalayas—the rush of water that comes along is vastly increased, and an extra outlet had to be found to cope with it. The added pressure soon found the line of least resistance, and there you are."

Tanami appeared to be duly enlightened, but it was Bob who was most impressed.

"Gosh!" exclaimed he. "If it hadn't been for that bally snow making things too lively, we'd have gone down the big drain sure enough. G-r-r-r!"

"But ain't there any way of getting out o' the perishin' place?" demanded Tanami suddenly. "We've had a pretty long trip inside the old tombstone, an' I'm getting sort o' interested in how we're goin' to see the other side again."

"Why, the place is honeycombed with exits," Notley replied; "only, you'd have to know your way about to reach them. The whole length of the rock is just a maze of caves surrounding the huge central one where the river flows. But at this end there are no passage-ways leading from the outside. That is why the overflow of the pool is unknown to any but the Patriarch and Ibrahim. So far as I am aware, the only possible way of getting down here from the top is through the roof of my humble abode. As the rank and file of the tribe live by the waterside and have

long since lost all interest in climbing, the ridge is pretty safe from prying eyes. Our only way to reach the plain safely is by getting aloft and following the crags to the south. I know a place there where it will be easy to get down, but next to impossible to come up."

"There won't be any need to worry very much about comin' up, I hope," Tanami said devoutly, as they retraced their steps.

The Mastodon could no longer be seen from the outlook in the rock when the party returned, but though this fact perturbed the mind of the bushman it aroused no forebodings in the hearts of the boys. To them M'Crimmon now appeared as a heroic figure of much resource, who would even then be planning some desperate measure for a rescue. The unexpected and hurried repair he had made to the engine had deeply impressed Stuart, and since the lad had had more time for reflection it also became a source of much wonderment.

"I don't know how he managed to do it, Dad," he said. "He must have started on the job when he heard our first shots fired, and carried it through as if there wasn't a native within miles. I think he's just a marvel."

"He certainly showed wonderful nerve and very sound judgment, Stuart. He knew at once that if the motor and the stores it contained were taken, the position would be hopeless for all concerned. From your description I imagine he is exactly the type of

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man I should like to have near me in a tight fix. Still, he has waited a full day, and he may think you are all beyond help now."

It was clear that Notley and Tanami shared the same feeling of anxiety at this time. M'Crimmon was not in sight. Cold logic might have shown him the uselessness of a single-handed attack upon a Blacks' stronghold. If he himself escaped he was sure to return with reinforcements, yet it was unlikely that he could break through the cordon of warriors who would be awaiting him, on the return trail. By this time the Patriarch's warnings to allied tribes would have been read far and wide.

They had a further hasty meal, and, scarcely speaking, waited for the night.

The sun, like a great ball of fire, touched the western rim of the horizon. For a few short minutes it glowed redly over the plain in diminishing splendour; then suddenly it had gone, and the wastes gloomed under the faint radiance of the stars.

Notley drew from an obscure corner of the room a block of wood, hollowed in the centre to receive a short rod of similar hard material. He was sprinkling some powdered eucalyptus leaves around the point of junction preparatory to turning the rod vigorously between his open palms. The friction would cause sufficient heat to ignite the tinder-like substance.

Tanami laughed, and produced the box containing his few remaining matches.

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"Light the blinkin' blaze like a Christian, Jim," he said. "It's sure to burn brighter."

"You've forgotten about your submarine trip already, old hoss," exclaimed Bob. "The bally things will be wet."

"Water-tight, Bob!" exclaimed the bushman, laconically. "Always safer that way. A man never knows what may happen."

The torch of dried twigs which had been prepared burst into flame and burned smokily. Holding it in his left hand, and obscuring it in front with a sheet of bark torn from the table, Jim approached the window. All clustered near. The deeper dark had not yet come, but a thick grey curtain enshrouded the land like an impenetrable mist.

"I'll give the S.O.S. signal first," said Notley. "After that, if he responds, I'll try to spell out some instructions. He must approach round by the south, showing no lights. But I had forgotten that he can't blanket the sound of the engine!"

No one had thought of this. Though the Mastodon roared mightily with the exhaust open, it could also purr quite softly when there was no particular strain on the cylinders. But even the smoothest murmuring would echo out in the still air of these solitudes.

"I'll tell him not to come too near," decided Notley hastily. "If we get clear away, it will be safer for us to walk a mile than have the whole tribe waiting to welcome M'Crimmon. Well, here goes!"

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But before he moved the guarding shutter he hesitated once again, then leaned forward in a listening attitude. He turned and looked at his companions inquiringly. Yes, they too heard the throbbing note that had crept into the atmosphere, and on the faces of each, lit up by the back glare of the torch, abundant satisfaction showed. The Mastodon was on the move and was coming towards them. The purposeful M'Crimmon, with some foolhardy plan, was answering the summons of the night before. Single-handed he was daring to force an issue with full a hundred warriors. Even the rising exuberance of Bob was checked in his throat.

"It's fine, but it's impossible," said Notley. "It won't help matters if he is killed or captured."

Quickly he flashed the letters: "S-t-o-p."

He repeated the signal twice before the pulsations ceased.

Then came a pause in which the silence seemed to brood like an ominous cloud over all, then the headlights of the Mastodon flamed into life. They glared through the night like two monstrous eyes.

"I reckon he's a good mile off yet," said Tanami. "Keep him there, Jim, and tell him to douse the lights."

Before the suggestion had left his lips the shining eyes began to blink. M'Crimmon was having his say.

"A-m c-o-m-i-n-g w-i-t-h b-o-m-b-s; c-h-e-e-r u-p."

Stuart's father spelt the words out slowly.

"God bless my soul!" he ejaculated. "He means to storm the mountain!"

"I reckon he's used up our case of gelignite making the blinkin' bombs," spoke Tanami, "and if he throws them around promiscuous-like he'll do a thundering lot o' damage."

"But it will require only one chance spear to finish him," remarked Notley. "He would be coming to certain death."

He began to send back a warning and an instruction:

"Danger too great. Think can escape south end ridge. Will be there within ten minutes. Creep in quietly and wait."

No answer came to this at once, but after a considerable pause the final message flashed.

"M'Crimmon—standing by."

"There's a directness about our bloodthirsty friend that I like," said Notley. "Now, my lads, up you go. Wait for me on top, and don't move until I come. You next, Tanami, old mate. I'll pass up the treasure."

Stuart led the way through the exit to the ridge, his father holding the fading torch for him to see. The ascent was not so difficult as it seemed, for rough steps had been cut into the wall at this point, and though they were nearly vertical they provided solid foothold. In less than a minute the four were standing on the rugged summit of the rock which had enclosed them.

Follow me step by step," Notley whispered.

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"We haven't quite a hundred yards to go, but every foot is treacherous."

They followed him, keeping close in the darkness. In the fullness of his joy Bob whistled softly to himself. At another time this pilgrimage over mouldering crags would have been exciting enough in itself. The rock at this end had lost its more solid structure and was weathering rapidly to decay. It was detaching into blocks and boulders which rested dubiously along the heights. The fretting hand of time had done its work. This part of the ridge was already dismembered. Soon it must topple over and mingle with the dust of the plains. Like goats they clambered, making light of the task. Gaunt uprearing structures silhouetted against the stars, and these were surmounted or skirted cautiously. The termination of the line came in a massive knob that looked like a ghostly Brobdingnagian head. Beyond this point the range melted mysteriously away. In a broken stream of mighty fragments and lesser rubble it strewed upon the sands.

Here Notley stopped and gave his instructions for the descent. A pathway down could with care be picked among the debris, but the crumbling foothold would bear but momentary pressure. Thus a return would be impossible. Once below, if escape was barred, there could be no retreat. Detection was inevitable.

Out to the west not a glimmer showed, but listening attentively a faint rhythmic beat could be heard, and Tanami hastily fixed a position by the sound. While

they waited, the pulsations ceased. All was still.

In another minute they stood at the base of the mountain. At last they were free of its imprisoning walls; only a short distance now separated them from safety.

"Thank God!" murmured Tanami fervently, and, his bushman's instinct prevailing, he took the lead, heading outwards towards the Mastodon with infallible confidence in his direction.

They had gone less than a hundred yards when a confused disturbance burst upon the air. It began in a series of shrieks which swelled in chorus until a combined and continuous wail was reached. They halted and gazed back into the gloom apprehensively. As they looked, a flare blazed up on the top of the rock they had so recently left, and now other voices joined in the uproar. The dirge-like note which had first prevailed was overwhelmed by an indescribable scream of triumph, which was taken up and echoed and re-echoed from end to end of the Twilight Kingdom. Something unaccountable had surely happened to stir the dwellers in the underground to such wild heights of frenzy.

"I've never seen a fire lit there before," said Notley, urging his companions onward. "It is just above the Patriarch's praying-room, and the only approach is through the secret door that you know. It looks unpleasantly like a signal to other tribes."

"If once we get clear of this, Jim," grunted Tanami, striding on, "I reckon we won't need to worry 'bout

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or'nary nigs. One or two o' M'Crimmon's bombs will frighten them off."

The fierce medley continued. It appeared to gain in harshness. The warriors were assembling in the open. Their clashing spears now added to the din.

"Gosh!" said Bob, "they're a happy family all right. Dashed good job they're behind us and not in front."

Tanami and Jim at this moment shared a fear they dared not speak. What would the watchful M'Crimmon do? His gaze would be fixed on the beacon in dismay. He would not understand any more than they did the cause of the natives' noisy agitation, but he might wholly misunderstand and then——!

"He's going!" groaned Tanami, "and we haven't a hope in the world o' stoppin' him."

The Mastodon had suddenly become illuminated. Not only were the giant head-lamps sending out their wide-angled rays, but the searchlight too had been pressed into service. At the same time the engine throbbed mightily to life.

M'Crimmon had thrown caution to the winds and was advancing grimly on his forlorn hope.

Aghast, the watchers stared. Tanami's matches were now the only resource, and it was more than doubtful that their feeble flicker would be seen—unless by the natives near at hand, who would quickly rush out to investigate. But this risk could no longer be considered. The tiny sparks of flame dabbed into the darkness, and a fresh storm of yells from behind intimated that they

had not been missed in that quarter. Instantly came the clatter of pursuit.

But it seemed that M'Crimmon too had observed, for the Mastodon changed its course and was bearing down upon the little band at its utmost limit of speed, the glare of the headlights cutting a channel through the night. Into the zone of brilliance some lurking forms made startling appearance. They hovered for a moment in the act of throwing their spears, like figures on a kinema screen, then they were literally ploughed aside. Almost at once a loud explosion took place in the shadows where they had vanished, and a blinding flash of flame spurted up from the ground. M'Crimmon had thrown his first bomb!

It was evident that the hastening four would have fared badly had they tried to penetrate this cordon, of which they had known nothing. Unarmed, they would have fallen easy victims at the very moment of escape. They recognized this, and even at such a trying time, when the screams of the pursuing warriors were loud in their ears, Tanami panted out generous tribute to the man who had so steadily stood by.

The giant motor was near; it loomed before them, majestic in its strength; but it was not a minute too soon. It would snatch the prey from the very teeth of the pack.

The man behind the wheel laughed aloud in his glee. He looked strangely bulky as he sat there wedged in the driver's seat, and not at all like the lanky individual the boys had known, yet a closer glance revealed

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how the metamorphosis had been accomplished. M'Crimmon had surrounded himself with all sorts of odd lumber to guard his body. His head, too, was thrust into a packing-case, from which the bottom had been knocked out. It rested loosely on his shoulders like a fantastic helmet. His face showed dimly through a large opening in front.

The motor slowed down but did not stop, and the quartette leaped aboard as it circled round in its own length. A shower of spears came whizzing through the air. Some thudded dully against the metal-work of the Mastodon, others skimmed high overhead, but one found a billet. Stuart had scarcely got clear of the ground when a tearing pain in his foot drew from him an involuntary cry. The Mastodon was gathering speed. For a moment he balanced precariously, clutching wildly with his hands for support, then he subsided helplessly into the sand. With an inarticulate roar Tanami jumped after him, and rushing to the boy, gathered him in his arms as the exultant horde came up. Carelessly he turned his back upon them and staggered off with his burden.

The Mastodon was pivoting round—Notley was rushing to meet him—Bob was already lighting the fuses of M'Crimmon's bombs. The bushman saw all this before he fell forward. Dimly to his ears came the fierce sounds of battle.

For the space of about thirty seconds an inferno raged; but the demoralizing gelignite charges did their work. The tribe drew back sullenly into the night.

Tanami was trying to sit up when his old comrade approached. Stuart, in an agony of despair, was assisting him.

"I reckon I'm all right, Jim," he said weakly. "Just nip that blinkin' spear from my back. Break it. Don't pull!"

"Thank God, old mate, there seems to be only one; I'll soon fix you up. I'll—I'll——"

Notley's voice failed him. When he felt for the deep embedded barb he nearly sobbed aloud. Only the bushman's iron will was keeping him conscious. Soon the valiant heart must give way in the unequal struggle.

And yet the sorely wounded man was the most cheerful of all. Only when he found that he could not walk unaided did he make any murmur.

"I just hate to be a hindrance," he muttered. "Just heave me on the old camel anywhere——"

M'Crimmon had shown no surprise at the addition of Notley to the party, but now a hurried explanation was made.

"I guessed it, man," said the Scot, "when the Morse signals came; an' it will be a glorious adventure if good old Tanami isn't badly hurt."

In the greater calamity, Stuart's wound received little thought. The lad himself would not speak of it, and, with Bob's assistance, crawled to his seat with a heavy heart. For long afterwards the hurt troubled him, for his foot was gashed from ankle to toe, and even when it healed it left a permanent limp.

He took the wheel from M'Crimmon, who wished

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to be free for any further emergency that might arise. His bombs, so called, were certainly more effective than any weapon that could be imagined. In the night especially their spectacular explosions alone would awe the most savage enemy.

"One plug o' dynamite, one detonator prodded gently into the middle, one ten-seconds fuse—and there you are!"

He confided this information to Bob as the Mastodon got under way.

"Strategy, my bold laddie, is everything," he continued. "I'm no' a man to take risks mysel', being o' a peaceful disposition. But still I would whisper a word o' wisdom in your shell-like ear. Always surprise the enemy, even if you can't hurt him much."

Stuart was steering for the well in the Creek of Diamonds. Here his father had decided to make a further stand against the natives, should they follow, for Tanami's wound required instant attention.

They drew near on the westward bank. The headlights laid bare the channel, and threw into relief a small tent that had evidently been hastily erected beside the shaft that Tanami had cleared; but no human being was in sight. Someone had surely come—and already had disappeared.

"The tent wasna here last night," said M'Crimmon, "for I filled the tank at the well in the sma' hours an' I saw no sign o' anybody."

"God help them, whoever they are!" muttered Notley. "They may have been taken already."

Tanami roused himself from apparent unconsciousness, and looked dimly at the evidence of man's presence in this fateful place. "Followed—our—tracks," he gasped. "I reckoned he would. . . . Jen-net. . . . poor devil!"

Notley and M'Crimmon carried him down into the creek and laid him gently on the sand. Bob stood on guard. Stuart remained by the engine, almost in a state of collapse. In his heart he prayed fervently.

Not one but many barbs had pierced the bushman's sinewy shoulders, but only one had penetrated deeply enough to do him deadly hurt. Notley stanchd the blood that welled from the jagged wound, but even as he did so he knew that his friend was beyond all human aid. He strove to hide his grief and speak words of encouragement, but the pretence was vain. His voice trembled and broke down.

Tanami looked up at him and smiled. "'Tain't any good, Jim," he whispered. "I reckon I've got my call . . . I don't mind goin', much, though I ain't brave, an' bein' no scholar I haven't got a grip o' the track. It's my last trail, Jim . . . Put me on the course so's I won't get bushed in the darkness——"

"You're on the course, old mate," cried Notley brokenly. "I'm taking my bearings from you."

Near by M'Crimmon stood, his forlorn visage working strangely under a powerful emotion. Tanami beckoned him with his eyes. He knelt by the dying man's side.

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"You're built o' the right stuff," came the weak voice. "Good-bye."

Now he called for the boys. Bob came first, openly weeping, and said farewell to the man for whom he had formed a deep and abiding affection. Then M'Crimmon carried Stuart to him.

Tanami gazed at the boy with a world of meaning in his fast dimming eyes.

"I kept . . . my promise . . . too . . . dear lad," he murmured. His words were almost inaudible. Stuart bent closer.

"My book . . . for you . . . in my kit. God . . . bless . . . you——" The tired eyes fluttered and closed, yet he smiled when his old comrade raised his head and pillowed it upon his knees.

Though seeming asleep, his lips moved feebly, and the softest murmur came:

"Read . . . it . . . to . . . me—Jim. I need . . . a hand——"

And Jim, calling memory to his aid, repeated, in a voice grown suddenly strong, the bushman's favourite passage from the *Pilgrim's Progress*:

"When the Day that he must go hence, was come, many accompanied him to the River side, into which, as he went, he said, Death, where is thy Sting? And as he went down deeper, he said, Grave, where is thy Victory? So he passed over, and the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

When he had finished, Tanami's eyes were open wide, and staring into the skies; but it was only the

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earthly tenement that was there for the watchers to see. The soul had gone questing on.

"Vale! brave spirit," spoke Notley softly, rising to his feet. "For you surely will Heaven open her gates, and let the trail-weary wanderer in."

He turned and saw two men standing by M'Crimmon. One gazed at him confidently, but the other's eyes were fixed upon the ground.

He who could look his fellow in the face pointed to the tent and spoke hurriedly:

"We got here to-night, following the motor trail, but cleared into the bush when we heard the Blacks on the rampage. Our camels are only back 'bout half a mile. My mate says now that the creek is yours by right o' discovery, an' I ain't kickin'."

Notley made his reply to him who had not spoken.

"I know you, Jennet," he said quietly. "I expected you before now."

"I couldn't make the trail," replied Jennet in a low voice. "I wanted the diamonds but I couldn't come alone, and nobody would come with me because I didn't know exactly the location of the place."

"You find me where you left me," continued Jim, as if the other had not spoken. "Are you glad or sorry, man?"

"Glad!" shouted Jennet. "Yes, so glad now that you wouldn't believe."

Bob surveyed the speaker curiously. He had seen that face before, but where was it? All at once he

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remembered. It was Slim Smith who stood there so querulously humble.

Notley pointed to where Tanami lay.

"There," he said, "is my friend, who at the last moment guessed you were here, and yet sympathized with you——"

"Sympathized with me? Why, Tanami has been hounding me down. He was my bitterest enemy!"

"And yet he would have saved you from the fate that will come to you both if you remain here for many more hours. If he could think this way on the point of death, when all things appear in their proper proportion, surely I cannot do less than give you warning. Go, and forget that this creek exists. Otherwise it will be your death. As for us, we move out on the eastern track at sunrise or before. I say to you both—Go, or it will be too late. Camels are slow moving. If you are in sight when morning comes, the natives will certainly take your lives."

"I believe you," answered Jennet, casting a swift look at the motionless form in the sand. "You've been mighty decent about it. We'll clear out right away."

His companion stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"Thank you, mate," he said. "I know you now. You are Jim Notley that was lost in these parts, an' I'm mighty glad to see you alive."

They did not trouble to dismantle the tent. They departed in haste.

It was a saddened party that remained by the Creek of Diamonds through the silent watches of the night. Where great joy might have been, sorrow had thrust her way. In the moment of triumph, black tragedy had obtruded its grisly presence.

The flare on the heights to the south had long since died down, and showed only as an intermittent glow against the sky when an occasional gentle breeze fanned the glowing embers. No sound now disturbed the stillness.

Notley knew that unless at the time of full moon the natives disliked to attack in the night. Some strong excitement must have driven them to face the Mastodon as they had done. He could not fathom a reason for their maddened behaviour. The Patriarch had always held their savage traits in check. At the rising of the sun they would come again; that was certain.

Labouring strenuously, Notley and M'Crimmon dug a deep grave on the eastern bank of the channel, and here by the pale light of the stars Tanami was laid to rest. They marked the place with a cairn of boulders, and over this the boys placed a rude cross which they had lovingly fashioned.

The sun's upper rim had peeped over the horizon before they were ready to go. Notley had decided on an eastern route which would take them into Queensland. They would sooner reach a port of embarkation for home in this way.

Down by the region of Twilight Land the tribe was gathering in the open. It was time to depart.

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"Gosh!" said Bob. "I'm blessed if this isn't Ibrahim comin' to see us off!"

A single native had made startling appearance from the creek. He advanced with hand upraised.

It was Ibrahim certainly, but an Ibrahim somehow changed. His arms and head were bedecked with weird ornaments and he wore the Patriarch's cloak—around his loins. He was evidently much excited and not a little afraid. His eyes were constantly turning towards the massing tribe in the distance.

"Zarabisra—Zarabisra—Me—Me!"

He smote his chest with his hand, and laughed childishly.

"I see," said Notley, after much pantomimic gesturing from the warrior. "The Patriarch is dead and Ibrahim reigns in his stead. I am not much surprised. Now will come the end that the old man feared. But part of his teaching still lingers in his savage successor. Ibrahim comes to warn us. This explains much that has happened."

Without further attempt at speech Ibrahim pointed wildly in the direction of the distant approaching band, then, turning, he made a bound for the creek and disappeared, running swiftly.

The Mastodon, with Stuart at the wheel and his father beside him directing the course, sped on. Behind, Bob and M'Crimmon were engaged in earnest conversation.

"I'd better mak' a clean breast o' my infamy," the man was saying. "You see, it was this way, Bob.

No' very long ago, when I was stranded like a fish in the land o' my birth, your dad made use o' my valuable services in his laboratory, and so it happened that I saw the first plans o' the Mastodon before they ever went near the works. If I may say it, who shouldn't, I made one or two suggestions which I observe have been carried out. Howsomever, the wandering spirit gripped me, and before you could say 'boo' I was sitting under the palm trees o' the East, and the spicy breezes were blowin' through my whiskers. That is the end o' part one.

"To continue, and cut a long story short, your dad, who had a misguided opinion o' my abilities, asked me to come back, an' I was thinkin' sort o' seriously on the same subject when along comes another letter, entrusting me wi' a job after my ain heart. Two young chaps were on the way out to the Australian Never-Never wi' a Mastodon in their baggage. Would I keep a guiding eye on them an' wi' much discretion see that they got safely through their wild adventure? I——"

"O-ho!" interrupted Bob, in whom enlightenment had been steadily growing. "So dear old Dad was nervous, was he? Gosh! M'Crimmon, you're a good sort. You've never once given a hint——"

"An' why should I?" demanded the engineer, with enthusiasm. "I was accepted as one o' the party on my ain merits; an' it was enough that I should share your risks—because—because my heart was wi' ye both. But I was aye standin' by in case o' trouble.

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Don't forget that, my lad, M'Crimmon was standin' by."

In front Notley was talking to his son on a subject that was dear to them both. They spoke of home, and the gladness that would await them there.

"Laurel will be nearly sixteen," he said tenderly. "These years will have made a lot of difference to her. She'll be getting quite grown-up."

"So Bob thinks," returned Stuart, with a smile.

The youth in the rear had heard the mention of a name that interested him exceedingly. He shifted in his seat and with sudden resolve tapped Notley on the shoulder.

"I hope you won't mind, sir, if I come along and see Laurel when we get home. She's been a dashed good chum to me; but maybe—maybe you'll think I'm—not—much—good——"

Captain Jim Notley turned round with eyes that shone.

"What I think of you, my boy, would take a long time to say, but I'll concentrate it in a single sentence and address it to you, Bob, to you M'Crimmon, and to my own son, Stuart:

"Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade."

The Mastodon thundered on, steering into the sun which had gloriously arisen.

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The morning paper had come. Mrs. Notley turned over the rustling sheets idly. She noticed briefly that there was renewed trouble in China, that something

was likely to happen to the gold standard in the near future, and also that the *Aquitania* had made another fast passage over the Atlantic. Then she glanced at a column headed "Late Cable News", and at once her apathy vanished.

"Oh, Laurel!" she cried, after a moment; then "Oh!"—again.

The girl came quickly forward, her eyes sparkling with suppressed excitement.

"What is it, Mummie? Oh! Let me look!"

Her young eyes scanned the small and blurred type unerringly and she burst out in a joyful "Hurrah!" while her mother unaccountably wept. The message which had affected them seemingly in such different fashion was brief but of immense import. It had been flashed to the world by a lonely operator at his distant post.

"Dight's Well Relaying Station, Transcontinental Telegraph Line—Notley Relief Expedition, accompanied by James Notley, who had been given up as dead, passed through here to-night. Reports one member of party, Charles Henley, otherwise Tanami Charlie, a well-known bushman, killed by natives. Another member suffering from spear wound. Leader gives high praise to Murray's Mastodon Tank car, model A, which carried the expedition throughout entire journey of one thousand miles."

"Oh, Jim!" cried the woman, in deep thankfulness. Yet her face streamed with tears. She rejoiced for the one who was coming back to her, one whom she had

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never thought to see again; she rejoiced in the safety of her fearless son who had brought this marvel about. But she wept because of a man she had never seen, a lonely bushman who would never more return from the land where he had pioneered.

Laurel's dreams were untroubled with any gloomy thoughts.

"I think he's just grand," she murmured happily, her mind far away.

"Who, dear?"

"Why, Bob, of course," answered the girl, with fine indignation.



